

TODD GURLEY and JULIO JONES:
TURNING FANTASY INTO REALITY

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Sports Illustrated

November 23, 2015 / **SI.COM**

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*On the Short List
of NASCAR'S
Greatest Drivers.*

...

*On the Even
Shorter List of Its
Most Important.*

The **LAST RIDE** of **JEFF GORDON**

By Mark Bechtel

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WHY
NO LOVE
FOR THE
BIG 12?

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FROM THE EDITORS OF GOLF.COM

G LD





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+ FEELING ROUSEY

KO'd by a kick to the head, previously unbeaten Ronda Rousey lost her bantamweight title belt to Holly Holm in UFC 193 (page 17).

PHOTOGRAPH BY

Quinn Rooney
Getty Images

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The biggest babies in sports are you, fans

SI HAS REGIONAL COVERS THIS WEEK:

Jared C. Tilton/Getty Images (Gordon);

Ron Johnson/Peoria Journal Star/AP (Gurley)

Sports Illustrated

SI NOW

WITH HOST
MAGGIE GRAY



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"I would rather see a knockout and get my money's worth."

—Oscar De La Hoya

may be a rematch with [Manny] Pacquiao. If you think about it, even if [a Pacquiao rematch] does half the business as the first fight, it's still a win for everybody.

MG: *Would you give him [Mayweather] a rematch?*

ODLH: No. It's too late. I'm sure he would give me a rematch.

MG: *He's asked.*

ODLH: Yeah, he's asked. I did try to come back. A couple of months ago I was thinking about coming back because I love the sport. I love the action, and I miss the adrenaline rush. So I was waking up at like five in the morning, running 10 miles and actually sparring. I got close. But then for days after that hard training, I couldn't get out of bed. I was sore. It's old age. This is a young man's sport.

For more of De La Hoya's interview, plus the SI Now archive, go to SI.com/sinow

TUNE IN



▶ **EPISODE: NOV. 10**

SI legal analyst Michael McCann looks at MLB's reaction to the arrest of Rockies SS Jose Reyes



▶ **EPISODE: NOV. 11**

SI.com's Pro Football Now team discusses the NFL's relationship with DraftKings and FanDuel



▶ **EPISODE: NOV. 12**

Oklahoma coach Bob Stoops says many college athletes are activists, but not all receive attention



▶ **EPISODE: NOV. 13**

Triathlete Coco Diemar, 11, discusses how she got into the sport and what it's like to be a national champion

■ OSCAR DE LA HOYA

The 42-year-old former boxing champ, who called it quits in 2009—two years after losing a split decision to Floyd Mayweather—explains why he isn't a fan of Mayweather's style in the ring.

MAGGIE GRAY: *You recently said boxing will be better off without Floyd Mayweather. Explain that.*

OSCAR DE LA HOYA: I come from the old generation of watching fights and being on the edge of my seat because the guys are knocking each other down and there is blood and great action. I just don't get that when I watch Mayweather. I respect

his talent. I respect his boxing ability, but [his style] is not my cup of tea. I would rather see a knockdown. I would rather see a knockout and get my money's worth and be excited about watching a fight.

MG: *Do you think Mayweather is going to stay retired?*

ODLH: No. I think he's going to come back and fight again. There are rumblings that there

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Leading Off

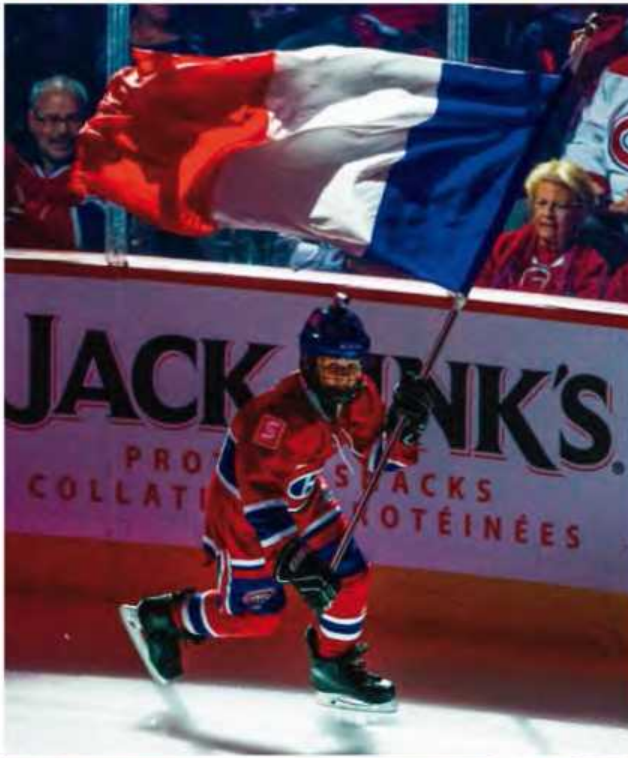


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Fraternité

In the wake of last Friday's attacks in Paris, which began with bombings outside the national soccer stadium during a Germany-France match, shows of support for the French people were ubiquitous in the sports world (clockwise from top): fans at the Arkansas-LSU game in Baton Rouge; Army defensive back Caleb McNeill (31), who bore the Tricolour alongside a French cadet at West Point; golfer Benjamin Hebert of France at a tournament in Shanghai; Ohio State QB Cardale Jones in Champaign, Ill.; a hockey fan at an Avalanche-Canadiens game in Montreal; Knicks forward Kevin Seraphin of France.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DERICK E. HINGLE/USA TODAY SPORTS; DANNY WILD/USA TODAY SPORTS; AP; MIKE DINOVO/USA TODAY SPORTS; PHILIPPE BOUCHARD/ICON SPORTSWIRE; NATHANIEL S. BUTLER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES









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NEWS

**Leading
Off**

Holm Fires

■ On Sunday in Melbourne, the unbeatable Ronda Rousey (far left) was beaten. The 28-year-old Rousey entered the bout with a 12-0 record and ranked No. 1 in the UFC bantamweight division. But Holly Holm, also of the U.S., a 34-year-old former world boxing champion, who was ranked eighth, knocked Rousey out 59 seconds into the second round to claim the title (page 17).

PHOTOGRAPH BY
PAUL CROCK
AFP/GETTY IMAGES





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**Leading
Off**

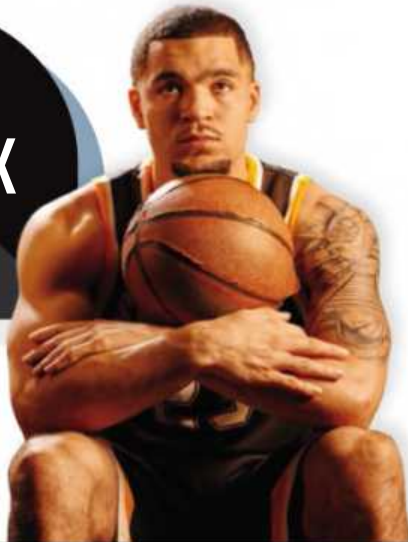
In Good Hand

■ Stanford senior wideout Devon Cajuste was able to make this catch even after Oregon cornerback Ugo Amadi pushed him last Saturday at Stanford Stadium. Cajuste was ruled out-of-bounds on the play, but Amadi was called for pass interference. While Cajuste made two receptions that did count, for a total of 37 yards, the Ducks upset the No. 7 Cardinal 38-36.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
EZRA SHAW
GETTY IMAGES

INBOX

FOR NOV. 9, 2015



Years of one-and-done players has diminished my love of college basketball, but Fred VanVleet's story (*Urban Legend*) is worth rooting for. Let's hope for another Final Four run for the Shockers.

Lonnie Burstein, Studio City, Calif.

I enjoyed your men's college basketball rankings. However, I was disappointed with the **women's rankings**. I think they deserve more attention in the magazine, especially non-top 5 teams that are still elite squads, such as Maryland and Ohio State, and others such as DePaul and Princeton.

Russell Finelsen, Fairfax, Va.



This year's **College Basketball Preview** was dominated by SI's Performance Projection System instead of your usual insightful narrative. Please save the sabermetrics and give us thoughtful, well-written prognostications.

Ken Heck, Mattoon, Ill.

What an amazing photo of American Pharoah crossing the finish line at the Breeders' Cup Classic (LEADING OFF)—1,200 pounds of glorious animal barely breaking a sweat, with the jockey looking at the camera as if to say, "This was too easy."

Jeffrey A. Chandler, New York City



COVER

The cover line claims the Royals "ran off with a World Series title no one saw coming." But Kansas City dominated the AL Central and finished with the AL's best record. I think plenty of people saw a championship coming.

Dusty Fors
Green Bay

Contrary to what Tom Verducci writes (*Crowning Moment*), the Royals didn't come up with a new model for success in the game. They just went back to the way baseball used to be played. Eric Hosmer's baserunning was actually vintage Ty Cobb.

Tim Speer
Midland, Texas



PAGE 14

SCORECARD

The item on the coaching and quarterback changes in the AFC East (*Standing Pats*) brings to mind the most impressive feat in the win-now-or-else era: The Steelers have had just three head coaches since 1969—not to mention a good track record.

Rich Fisher
Hamilton, N.J.

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Scientific evidence suggests but does not prove that eating 1.5 ounces per day of most nuts, such as pistachios, as part of a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol may reduce the risk of heart disease. See nutrition information for fat content. © 2015 Wonderful Pistachios & Almonds LLC. All Rights Reserved. WONDERFUL, GET CRACKIN', the Package Design and accompanying logos are registered trademarks of Wonderful Pistachios & Almonds LLC or its affiliates. WP14279



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Edited by JIM GORANT + TED KEITH + ELIZABETH NEWMAN

SCORECARD

Pekin Choose

The author's high school made the tough decision the Redskins haven't

BY RICHARD B. STOLLEY

THE RELUCTANCE to alter objectionable names of sports teams—the Redskins are the current poster boys—has an interesting history, and one of the more lurid examples is the Pekin Chinks.

Yes, that's right. The Chinks from Pekin (Ill.) Community High, an astonishing nickname that survived nearly half a century. How it finally disappeared in 1980 could suggest a solution for the team in our nation's capital.

The name was first used in an early 1930s headline of a newspaper in nearby Peoria and soon appeared in stories, including those in the *Pekin Daily Times*. This seems like the moment to acknowledge that I was part of the problem. I grew up in

Pekin, and I was the teenage sports editor of the *Pekin Times* from 1944 to '46, and for two years I peppered the sports pages with *Chinks*.

There was some historical justification for Chinks, however misguided. In the 1820s the founders of this little town on the Illinois river, about halfway between Chicago and St. Louis, christened it Pekin because they thought it was on the opposite side of the globe from Peking, China, that exotic capital of the mysterious East. It wasn't; if you dug through the earth, you'd come up in the Indian Ocean.

But early residents were proud of the distinctive name and labeled Pekin, as the Chinese did Peking, The Celestial City. In fact



the local sports teams at one point were called the Celestials. The name never caught on.

Instead, Chinks blossomed, including team mascots called Chink and Chinklette, which were students dressed in traditional Chinese silks who would strike a gong whenever the team scored. The name appeared in any story about a PCHS athletic team for more than 40 years. Complaints were a long time coming. One presumed reason was the absence of Chinese residents in that part of the state. Growing up, I remember none at all.

The public battle to expunge Chinks began seriously in 1974, when

“In the end all it took to eliminate a damaging nickname was one brave man.”

members of the National Organization of Chinese-Americans in Chicago visited Pekin to speak to city officials. But the Chamber of Commerce threw up its hands, saying the town “was chagrined to find out the word Chink was considered derogatory.” The mayor and city attorney said they could not force the school to change.

The disappointed Chinese-Americans met with the student council, and the superintendent of schools agreed to a vote among juniors and seniors. The school newspaper urged a change, its editor writing, “These guys told us the name Chinks hurts their feelings. . . . Why do we want to keep the name

when it really hurts them?” The students voted 1,034 to 182 to keep Chinks.

But the leading Peoria newspaper, the *Journal Star*, announced that starting in 1975, it would no longer print the name. The Associated Press spread that story nationwide too.

The school board appointed a subcommittee to evaluate the situation, and it suggested a citywide referendum on whether to keep the name, change it to Dragons (a fire-breathing dragon was part of the school’s emblem) or drop the Chinese theme entirely. But the vote never came to pass.

Soon thereafter the Illinois Commission on Human Relations

threatened to sue. Following a complaint from the Asian American Educators Association, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare’s Civil Rights office decided that the name did not discriminate against Asian-American students at PCHS. The reason? Apparently the school had few, if any, Asian-American students.

But pressure was building. More Illinois newspapers stopped printing the name, and the Chink and Chinklette mascots were dropped from halftime ceremonies.

Then, in 1980, everything changed. In June the school board hired James Elliott from a Chicago suburb as superintendent. He was

aware of the controversy and had strong opinions; whether he discussed them with the school board is unclear. In any case, two months later Elliott met for the first time with PCHS faculty and announced that Dragons would immediately replace Chinks. New football jerseys, he said, had already been ordered. The teachers accepted the news calmly.

Not so for many students and alums. A couple hundred marched in protest outside the school, chanting slogans like Pekin Chinks, Dragon stinks, and carrying placards saying, OLD CHINKS NEVER DIE—THEY JUST DRAG-ON.

But public anger gradually subsided, except for THE LAST OF THE CHINKS T-shirts that appeared at the graduation ceremony that spring. In 2011 academia got around to celebrating the transition with a journalism master’s thesis out of Ball State, “The Pekin Chinks: A Historical Account of a City’s Tradition.” But online the battle continues. A recent Google search turned up a PCHS graduate who said he had been a proud member of the Chink-Chinklette duo and bemoaned that “the school buckled under,” to “pointy headed pablum sucking liberals who run the political correctness gestapo in this country.”

In the end all it took to eliminate a damaging nickname was one brave man. Whether it’s an example for Washington, well, that is up to the team owner. He should note that attendance at Pekin High’s sports events never fell off. □

GO FIGURE

0.0

Passer rating for Broncos QB Peyton Manning in Sunday’s 29-13 loss to the Chiefs, the same game in which he broke Brett Favre’s record for career passing yards. It was announced on Monday that Manning has a partially torn planar fascia in his left foot.



\$15

Amount, in cash, found by Redskins players Pierre Garçon and Matt Jones on the turf at FedEx Field while huddling during the third quarter of Sunday’s 47-14 win over the Saints.



16.8

Approximate distance, in miles, of the Bangkok half-marathon on Sunday, 3.7 miles more than the regulation distance. Organizers said a mistaken sign placement caused runners to make a U-turn.





Sneak Peek

Who's wearing what among the nation's top high school basketball players

UNDER ARMOUR'S move into the sneaker wars—it now sponsors eight of the Power 5 conference teams—has prompted talk about the influence of shoe companies in AAU basketball, based on the idea that acclaimed high schoolers are often funneled to colleges that wear the same brand as their summer-league team. Well, Nov. 11 marked the beginning of the weeklong early signing period, and while not every player will commit in the fall, 20 of the top 29, based on RSCIhoops.com's aggregate ranking, had as of Monday. According to the data, half of the high school stars stuck with their AAU team's brand.

—Greg Habeeb

| RANK | PLAYER, POSITION | AAU TEAM (AFFILIATION) | COLLEGE (AFFILIATION) |
|------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 | Harry Giles, PF | Team CP3 (Jordan)* | Duke (Nike) |
| 3 | Jayson Tatum, SF | St. Louis Eagles (Nike) | Duke (Nike) |
| T-5 | De'Aaron Fox, PG | Houston Hoops (Nike) | Kentucky (Nike) |
| T-5 | Dennis Smith, PG | Team Loaded NC (Adidas) | N.C. State (Adidas) |
| 7 | Lonzo Ball, PG | Big Ballers VXT (No Sponsor) | UCLA (Adidas) |
| 9 | Miles Bridges, SF | The Family (Nike) | Michigan State (Nike) |
| 10 | Jonathan Isaac, SF | E1T1 Elite (Nike) | Florida State (Nike) |
| 11 | Markelle Fultz, SG | DC Blue Devils (Under Armour) | Washington (Nike) |
| 12 | Terrance Ferguson, SG | MWA Elite (Under Armour) | Alabama (Nike) |
| 13 | Frank Jackson, PG | Utah Prospects (Adidas) | Duke (Nike) |
| 15 | T.J. Leaf, PF | Compton Magic (Adidas) | UCLA (Adidas) |
| 16 | Wenyen Gabriel, PF | Mass Rivals (Adidas) | Kentucky (Nike) |
| 18 | Joshua Langford, SG | Atlanta Celtics (Adidas) | Michigan State (Nike) |
| T-19 | Omari Spellman, C | PSA Cardinals (Nike) | Villanova (Nike) |
| 22 | Mustapha Heron, SF | New York Rens (Adidas) | Auburn (Under Armour) |
| 24 | V.J. King, SF | Team Takeover (Nike) | Louisville (Adidas) |
| 25 | Sacha Killeya-Jones, PF | Team Felton (Under Armour) | Kentucky (Nike) |
| 27 | Tyus Battle, SG | New Heights (Under Armour) | Syracuse (Nike) |
| 28 | Tony Bradley, C | E1T1 Elite (Nike) | North Carolina (Jordan) |
| 29 | Cassius Winston, PG | The Family (Nike) | Michigan State (Nike) |

Change of affiliation *Jordan is owned by Nike

Hit and Ronda

Who is new UFC champ Holly Holm?

It's "martial" and it's "art," but it's also "mixed," and this third component is critical. Greg Jackson, the sport's foremost trainer, likens fighters' skills to four-legged tables. The legs are wrestling, jujitsu, kickboxing and boxing, and if one is shorter than the others, then the structure

becomes rickety. This was illustrated on Sunday at UFC 193 in Melbourne. In the biggest upset in the sport's history, Holly Holm didn't merely defeat Ronda Rousey; she knocked her out cold in the second round of their bantamweight title fight.

For Holm (*right*), an 18-to-1 underdog, surviving the first round—a claim only one of Rousey's 12 pro opponents could make—would have marked an achievement. The short leg of Rousey's table, though, is her boxing, which is also Holm's strength. She



was a champ—with wins over Mia St. John and Christy Martin—before gravitating to MMA. Holm, 34, married slick footwork with heavy punching, bloodying Rousey with

jabs and preventing the 28-year-old champ from taking her to the ground, where she could deploy her signature arm bar. A minute into the second round, Holm slipped a left hand and then followed with the knockout blow, a left kick—Holm was also a top kickboxer in her pre-MMA life—that caught Rousey under her right ear.

A rematch is inevitable, perhaps as early as the summer of 2016. Until then, Rousey will work on throwing and avoiding punches, trying to rebuild a table that, unexpectedly and spectacularly, toppled.

—L. Jon Wertheim

EXTRA MUSTARD

Ultimate Farming Championship

Match the jock with his crop

BEFORE SHE GOT KO'd, Ronda Rousey told 120 Sports that when her fighting days are over, she plans to retire to a life of buffalo farming. If so, she won't be the first jock to take to coaxing the fruit from the land. Match the current or retired athletes below with the product they produce on either their own or a family farm.



SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

Georgia DB Rico McGraw was knocked out of the Auburn game by a celebratory head slap from an assistant coach.

Gary Pinkel

The Mizzou coach retires as he fights cancer. For once, "spend time with family" is believable.



HOT ▲
NOT ▼



One-color Unis
The red-green color blind were stumped by the Bills-Jets; the rest of us were nauseous.

| | | | | |
|--|--|--|---|---|
| 1. JASON BROWN Rams C | 2. GIOVANNI CARMAZZI 49ers QB | 3. ROSS OHLENDORF Rangers P | 4. RAEF LAFRENTZ Celtics C | 5. JORDY NELSON Packers WR |
| A. GOATS | B. CORN | C. CATTLE | D. WHEAT | E. FRUITS & VEGETABLES |

ANSWER KEY: D, 1, E / 2, A / 3, C / 4, B / 5, D

THEY SAID IT

"I'M TRYING TO WATCH THE DAMN GAME!"

Harrison Ford

The *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* actor relaying his reaction to the 90-second trailer that ran during the Oct. 19 *Monday Night Football* game.

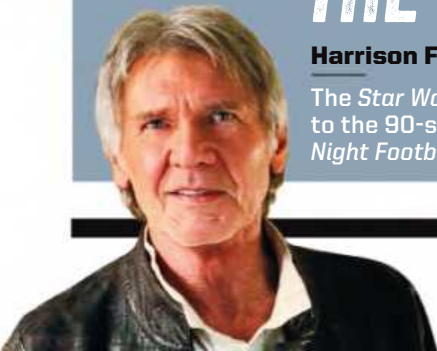
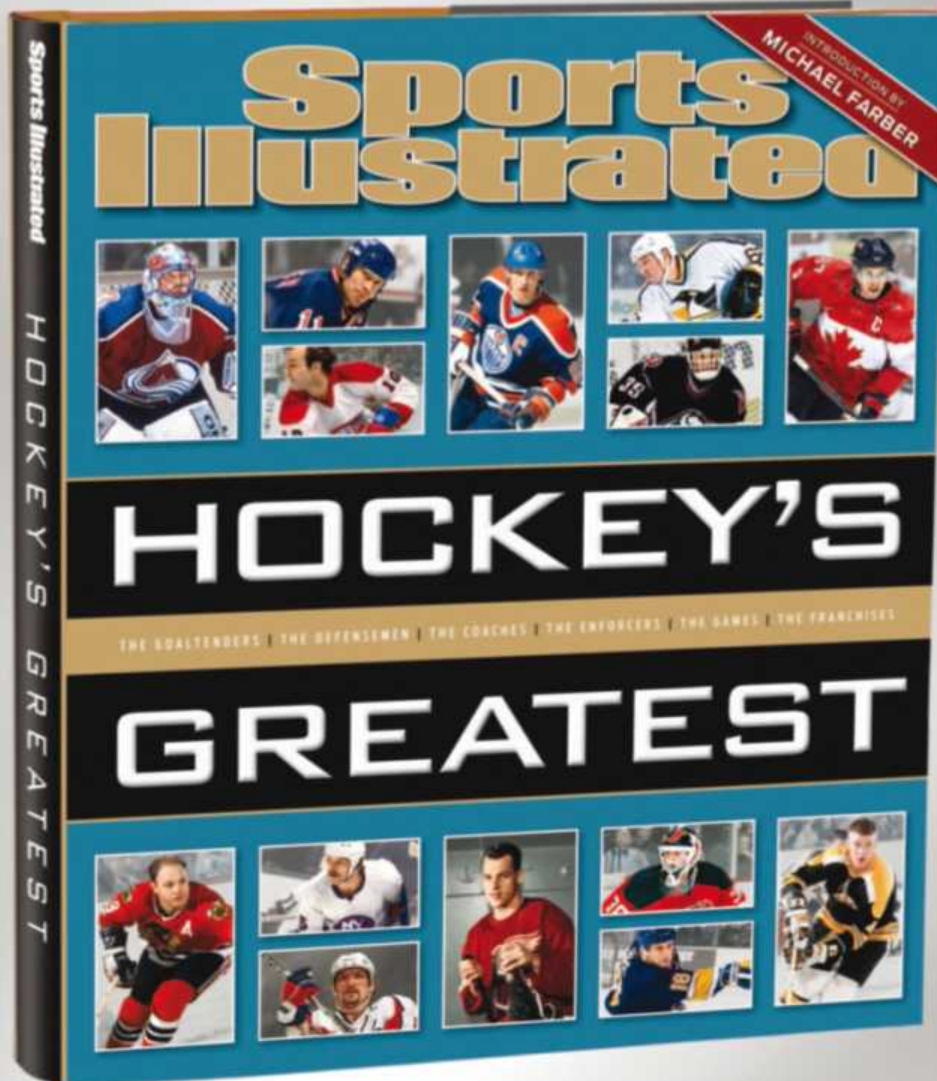


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Tren'Davian Dickson | Navasota, Texas | Football

Tren'Davian, a senior wide receiver at Navasota High, had one touchdown reception in a 52-16 win over Columbia High (West Columbia) to reach 73 for his career, tying the state record. Last season he set a national mark with 39 TD catches while leading the Rattlers to the Class 4A state title. Tren'Davian will play at Baylor.


Lauren Bouvia | Weiser, Idaho | Soccer

Lauren, a junior striker at Weiser High, scored three goals in a 4-1 defeat of defending champion Coeur d'Alene Charter Academy in the state 3A final. The hat trick extended her national single-season goals record to 127. Lauren scored six times in a 10-0 district title win over McCall-Donnelly High to break the previous mark of 106, set in 1989.


Krando Nishiba | San Diego | Golf

Krando, a freshman at La Jolla Country Day School, drained a 35-foot putt for birdie on the 9th hole of the PGA Junior League championships at Disney's Palm Course in Lake Buena Vista, Fla., leading the California All-Stars past Team Georgia in a playoff. He had missed a similar putt on the same par-4 hole 10 minutes earlier.

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited by ALEXANDRA FENWICK


Ella Donaghu | Portland | Cross-country

Ella, a senior at Grant High, broke a 22-year-old state meet course record by 8.90 seconds with a 17:26.00 finish on the Lane Community College 5K course in Eugene, winning her third straight 6A title. Ella's time of 16:46.61 at the Sundodger Invitational in Seattle in September is the seventh best in the nation this season.


Carter Levine | Princeton, N.J. | Rowing

Carter, a junior at Princeton High, set one U.S. and two world records for indoor rowing at the Caspersen Rowing Center in West Windsor, N.J. He covered 500 meters in 1:19.4 and 1,000 in 2:55.3, both world marks for ages 15 to 16. Carter also set a national age-group record for the 30-minute row, logging 8,325 meters.


Haddon Hughes | Houston | Sailing

Hughes, a freshman at Georgetown, won seven of her last eight races to take the Intercollegiate Sailing Association's single-handed national championship in Norfolk. The 2014 youth worlds silver medalist, she finished 11th in the Laser Radial class at her first ISAF World Cup event in Miami last January. Hughes is ranked 44th in the world.



REVIEW

West Bank Drift

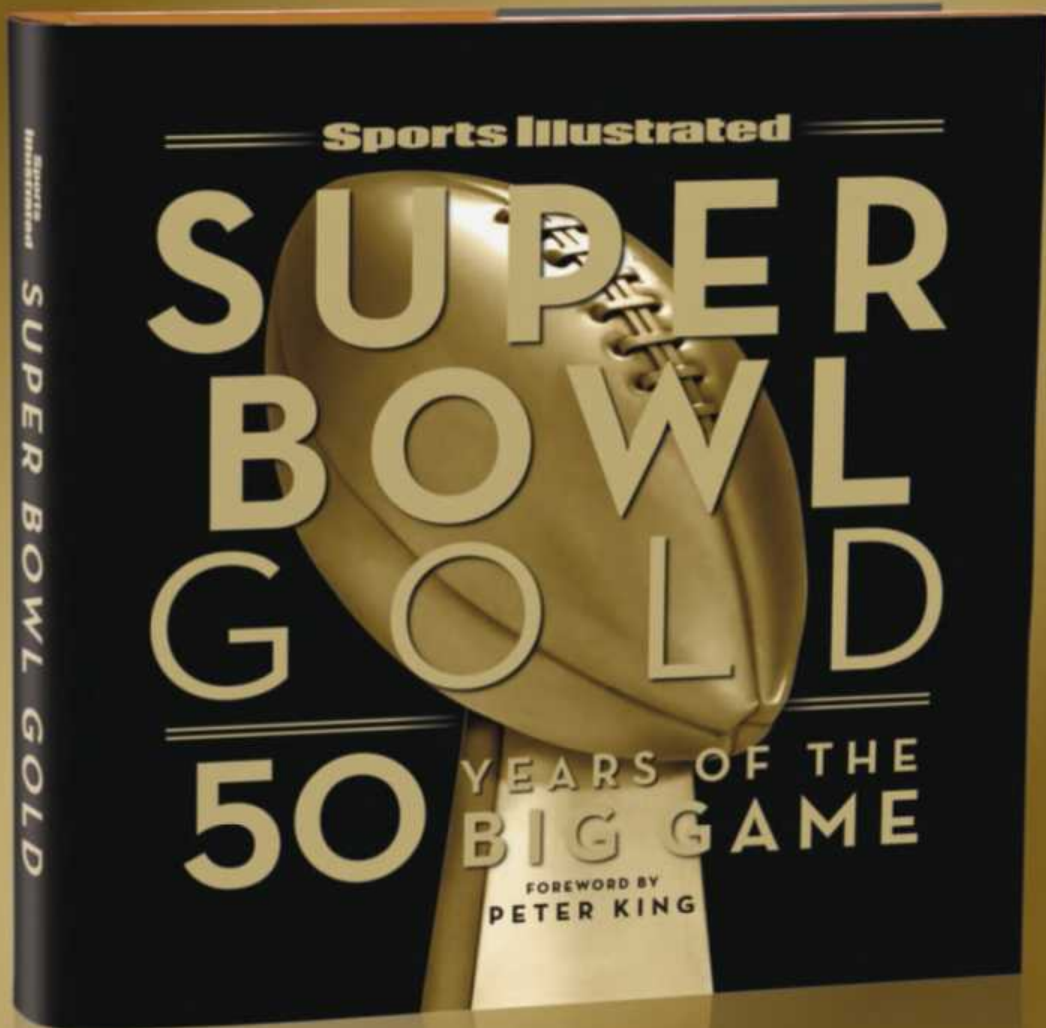
■ **The five women** of the documentary *Speed Sisters*, a chronicle of the first women's auto racing team in the Arab world, blaze onto the screen to the sound of screeching tires as they compete against men in Palestine's thriving street-racing scene and against each other. The kinetic documentary, full of donuts, drifts and burning rubber, also provides a glimpse into the life of an independent woman in a religious society and into the daily realities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In between nail appointments, grandparents' beseeching them to wear their veils, military checkpoints and even being shot at with rubber bullets, the women race in souped-up cars on improvised autocross tracks in the West Bank with a determination to be true to themselves. Asks racer Marah Zahalka, "What are we supposed to do, stop living?" —A.F.

Nominate Now

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, go to SI.com/faces. For more on outstanding amateur athletes, follow [@SI_Faces](https://twitter.com/SI_Faces) on Twitter.

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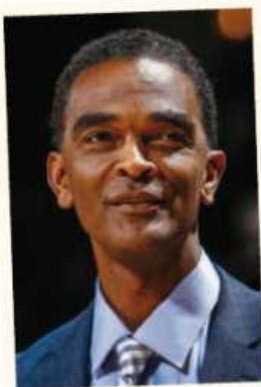
Ralph Sampson

The Hall of Famer is still a giant figure with lofty goals

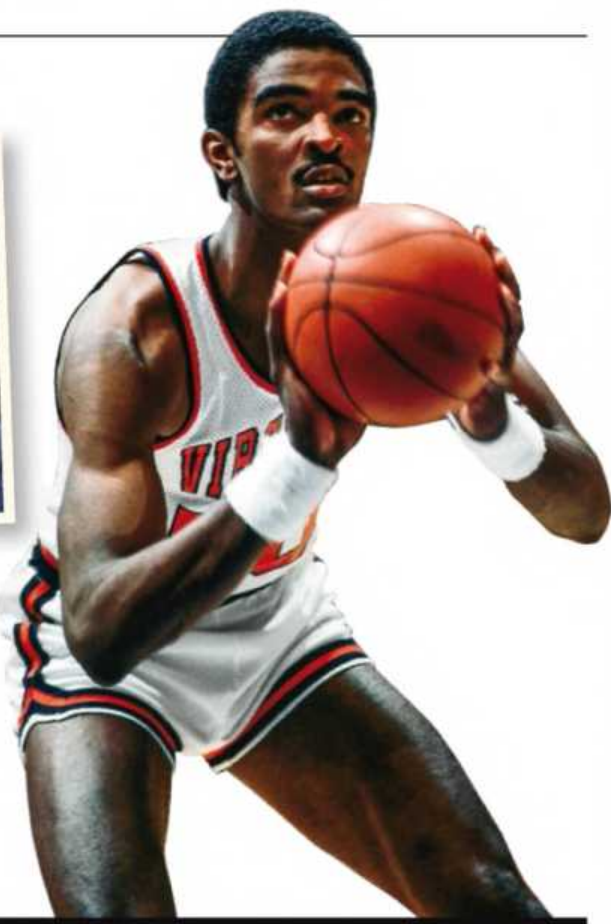
IF IT IS TRUE, as Ralph Sampson says, that “you can’t hide seven feet tall,” then it is easy to understand why a three-time college basketball player of the year, four-time NBA All-Star and someone who is actually 7’ 4” has never disappeared despite playing his last professional game more than 20 years ago.

Sampson is no longer the center of attention the way he was as one of the most heavily recruited high school players ever, or during his career at Virginia and with the Houston Rockets, but at 55 he remains a towering public figure. He has a small business development and marketing company called Winner’s Circle that specializes in telecommunications, and he splits his time between Atlanta and his native Harrisonburg, Va., where he helps care for his parents, especially his father, Ralph Sr., who overcame a battle with lung cancer and is currently undergoing radiation for prostate cancer. (Ralph is working to establish a Ralph L. Sampson Sr. Cancer Fund at his alma mater and in his hometown.)

During his frequent visits to Charlottesville, Sampson prefers to watch the Cavaliers “peacefully,” but it’s hard for fans to ignore someone who took the program to heights



“I feel that crisp breeze in the air, and my body starts to jump a little knowing basketball season is right around the corner.”



it has rarely reached since. During his four seasons, 1979–80 through ’82–83, Virginia won 83% of its games, the 1980 NIT championship and three ACC regular-season titles, and reached the 1981 Final Four. But it is one of Sampson’s 23 losses that people remember most.

On Dec. 23, 1982, the top-ranked Cavaliers lost in Honolulu to Chaminade, an NAIA school, 77–72. It is one of the more improbable upsets in sports history, and it helped give rise both to the Maui Invitational, which debuted in 1984 and will conclude

its 32nd edition on Nov. 25, and to an unlikely friendship. Sampson and Merv Lopes, the coach of the Silverswords’ team that felled the giants, have remained in touch. Earlier this month Lopes called Sampson from an office in Los Angeles, where the ex-Chaminade coach is trying to drum up support for a movie about the game.

“It would be fun to be a part of something like that,” says Sampson, “if you tell the right story, and not just the game itself.” Sampson’s own story is proof that the best tales are never just about the game. —Ted Keith

IF YOU DON'T THINK
“**TOP OF MY GAME**”
WHEN YOU THINK AARP

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JUST MY TYPE

→ Interview by DAN PATRICK

DAN PATRICK: *Do you care if the media or the rest of the country buys into the Panthers?*

GREG OLSEN: We're not overly concerned with it. The NFL is so black-and-white. You win, you lose. Your record indicates where you stand. It's not the [College Football Playoffs]. We don't need style points. We don't need votes. We have our destiny in our hands.

DP: *Have you been surprised by any of the wins?*

GO: I don't think we're surprised by any win. We prepare and expect to win. If you start doubting yourself, it can make for a pretty daunting task.

DP: *How would you describe Cam Newton's personality in one word?*

GO: *Lively.* Well, maybe *vibrant* would be better. He brings a lot of life to a lot of situations. It comes through pretty clearly on game day. He's full of energy. Sometimes people use that as a negative against him, which I find somewhat amusing. The guy loves to play the game. He wants to win, and he'll do anything that his team needs to win. He'll sacrifice his body, run, take shots or extend plays. That's what you're looking for in a quarterback.

DP: *He also seems a little goofy.*



GREG OLSEN

TOP OF THE HEAP

The 30-year-old tight end leads the 9-0 Panthers in catches (45), receiving yards (664) and TD receptions (five) while averaging a career-high 14.8 yards per catch. But don't tell his wife about the pileups.

GO: He's a kid trapped in a man's body. That's what works for him. That's what works for our team, his larger-than-life personality. People aren't used to seeing that sort of personality or style of play out of the quarterback position. But that's what makes him fun. We're not going to ask him to change. And he shouldn't have to change to fit the mold of what everyone expects him to be.

DP: *Broncos cornerback Aqib Talib got fined for poking Colts tight end Dwayne Allen in the eye in Week 9. Does that kind of thing happen often?*

GO: I saw that happen live. I was like, Oh, man, he couldn't have meant to do that. But the more you watch it, it's harder to rationalize that he didn't do it [on purpose]. If he didn't mean to do that, it was bad, bad luck.

DP: *Does your wife [Kara] ask about what happens in the pile?*

GO: I'll tell you [what happens]. I won't tell her. That would just get her nervous, more than she already is. I've had my ankle twisted after tackles. I've had guys try to push me over the back of a pile to get me caught up and flipped backwards. It's a tough world out there.

DP: *Does anyone go for the man region?*

GO: I've heard stories about that happening. Fortunately that hasn't happened to me. That would be the end. I think my retaliation to that would be pretty bad. I'd probably be penalized or fined. □

GUEST SHOTS SAY WHAT?



Six-time NASCAR Sprint Cup Series

champion **Jimmie Johnson** admitted he recently attended a Taylor Swift concert. "I'm sure there was some unfortunate singing going on," Johnson said. "Taylor plays nonstop in our car on the way to [my daughter Genevieve's] school. I do know the lyrics, unfortunately, by heart." . . . Former Raiders and USC quarterback **Todd**



Marinovich told me it was common

for athletes to get paid when he was in college. "There were thousands of dollars being handed around," Marinovich said. "But none of it was really in my direction." . . . Bills



QB Tyrrod Taylor had no problem

with the media's paying so much attention to coach Rex Ryan before Buffalo's 22-17 win over the Jets. "He never made it about him," Taylor said. "He's a fun guy to be around. He relates to every player."

FASTEST MAN ALIVE
WORLD NUMBER ONE
TRIPLE CROWN
GREATEST SHOOTER



A DEFINING YEAR IN SPORTS

WHO WILL IT BE?

GRAND SLAM
FASTEST MAN ALIVE
TRIPLE CROWN
WORLD CUP

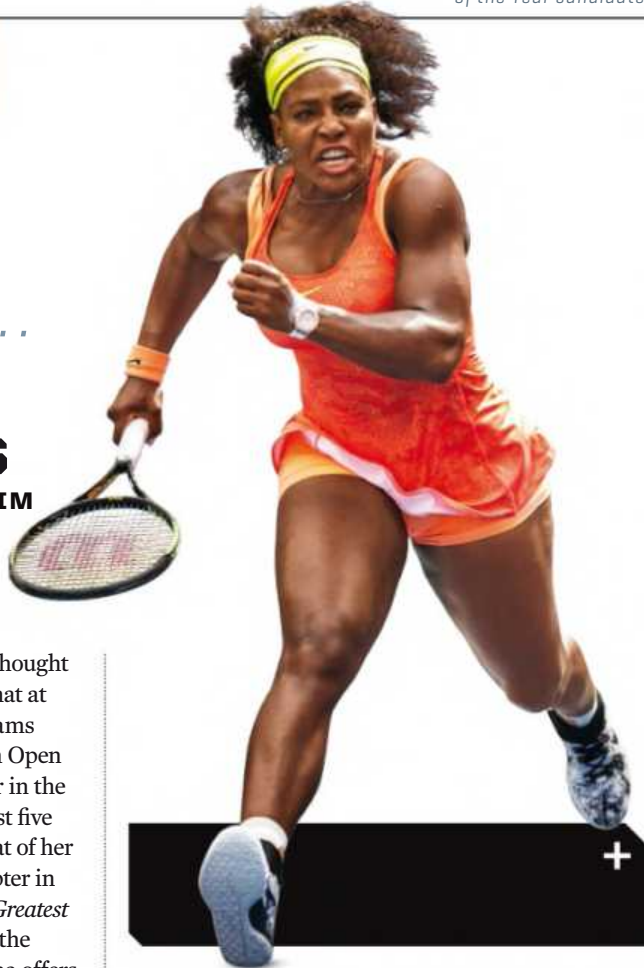
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CELEBRATING EXCELLENCE WITH



SPORTSMAN
OF THE YEAR*The Case for . . .***Serena
Williams**

BY L. JON WERTHEIM



HERE'S A QUICK thought exercise: Imagine that at 33 years old, Serena Williams enters the 2015 Australian Open as the No. 1-ranked player in the world. She reels off her first five matches, including a defeat of her sister Venus (another chapter in *The Williams Sisters: The Greatest Sports Story Ever Told*). In the semifinals, however, Serena offers a rare glimpse of her gag reflexes and loses a tight, nerve-addled match to a No. 43-ranked Italian journeywoman.

It's a profoundly disappointing defeat, no doubt. But then Serena recovers and wins the French Open, Wimbledon and the U.S. Open. Three major championships played under different sets of circumstances, on different surfaces, requiring three different skill sets. She also wins two other big-ticket titles: Miami and Cincinnati. With an almost risible match record of 53-3 in 2015, she is not just the WTA's top player; she is the belt hoisting the entire Tour. By mid-summer, the chasm in points separating her from the world's No. 2 (then Maria Sharapova) was wider than the gap between No. 2 and No. 1,000.

Put it all together, and this

constitutes one of the greatest seasons ever in all of sports (never mind tennis), right?

Well, Serena did achieve all of the aforementioned in 2015. The difference, of course, was that she achieved it all in reverse. She won the year's first three Slams but fell in the U.S. Open semifinals in September. Whether it's recency bias, or disappointment that she came so tantalizingly close to winning *the* Grand Slam (all four majors in a calendar year), to some the loss appeared to diminish her year. Which is absurd. Sure, it's a pity she couldn't pull off perhaps the most formidable feat in sport. But that should not, and does not, obscure her singularly excellent season.

It wasn't simply the volume. There were matches Serena won with her unprecedented, unanswerable power. (One

example: the Aussie Open final in which she blasted Sharapova for the 17th time in 19 matches, thrashing 18 aces—the same number No. 1 Novak Djokovic and then No. 6 Andy Murray served between them when they played in the men's final.) Sometimes she solved the riddle of her opponents mid-match, made the necessary adjustments and cruised. Other times she showed off her powers of recovery—call it her refuse-to-lose-ness—and prevailed by sheer force of will. At Roland Garros, visibly sick with the flu, she lost a set in five of her seven matches. Still, she fashioned an escape each time.

Now 34, Serena is still going gangbusters. This speaks so eloquently to her professionalism, her commitment and, ultimately, her deep-seated fondness for a sport that—and she would admit this—hasn't always been in evidence. Plus, with 21 career major singles titles spread over 16 years, she is within one of tying Steffi Graf's Open era mark. The body of evidence supporting Serena's case as the sport's GOAT (Greatest Of All Time) is verging on overwhelming.

So consider this a vote, submitted without reservation, for Serena as the 2015 Sportswoman of the Year. She won as a matter of ritual. She continues to set the standard for an athlete, gender be damned, who marries power with accuracy and competitive resolve.

One of tennis's many virtues is its absence of a clock. But that can also have the effect of distorting time. She should be judged on the totality of her year, not her most recent match. If you stand back and view her entire season, it becomes clear: Serena's Sportswoman candidacy is not unlike her status in tennis. Everyone else is just playing for second place. □

With an almost risible match record of 53-3, she is not just the WTA's top player, **she is the belt hoisting the entire Tour.**



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Guru Man

BACKS LIKE DICKERSON AND WALKER AND PETERSON HAVE CHIPPED AWAY AT THE RECORD BOOK OVER THE YEARS. BUT WITH **TODD GURLEY**, WHO EMBODIES THE BEST QUALITIES OF EACH OF THOSE LEGENDS, IT'S NOT HARD TO IMAGINE ALL THE RECORDS FALLING TO ONE MAN

BY GREG BISHOP

Photograph by
Hannah Foslien
Getty Images

irley,



THE RAMS' running backs file into their ground-floor meeting room most Saturday mornings and settle into blue theater-style chairs across from an expansive dry-erase board. Ben Sirmans, their position coach, fires up the projector, a remote affixed to his right hand. He wants the clips he shows to teach and motivate and inspire, and so he plays highlights of famous running backs—men his charges should aspire to emulate on the field. There's Adrian Peterson slicing through defenders, Eric Dickerson dancing upfield, Herschel Walker knocking linebackers back in time. An R&B mix without the ampersand.

Sirmans's youngest pupil, Todd Gurley, likes to sit in the front row, Jolly Ranchers lining his pockets, a pen perched over the notebook he carries everywhere but on the field. This is how Gurley spends his weekends: On Saturdays he examines highlights; on Sundays he creates them.

Gurley is a generator of comparisons. He's the first rookie tailback in NFL history to gain at least 100 yards in each of his first four starts. He's the (baby) face of a once-moribund franchise—one that began this season 4–3, somehow its best start since 2006. He's the next Peterson, the next Walker, the next Dickerson. His play encourages the loftiest comparisons, despite a sample size of just six total starts. That's because his skill set—a rare blend of speed, size, power, balance and vision—makes him less like any one of the greats he is compared with and more like a blend of their best attributes.

"He reminds you of three or four different people, and those people, they're usually the best at one style or skill," says Rams general manager Les Snead, reclining behind the desk in his office, where a framed Dickerson jersey hangs on the wall. "That's what's rare about Todd. It takes like four backs to become one him."

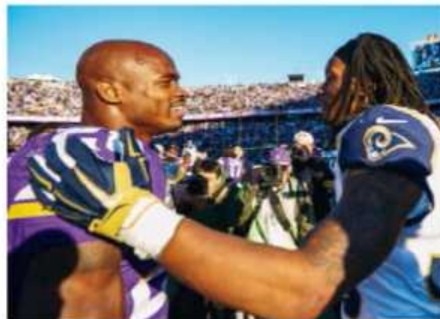
From 2007 to '11 the Rams went 15–65, the worst five-year stretch for any franchise in NFL history. Snead—a man whose shoulder-length, sandy blond hair raises comparisons of its own: a young David Beckham, *Reality Bites*-era Ethan Hawke—took over in '12 and immediately began building a formidable defense that would inch the franchise toward respectability. Then Gurley arrived last April, a steal as the No. 10 pick in the draft, and transformed St. Louis into a playoff contender for the first time in more than a decade. (He also helped shift this season's story line away from, you know, the team's rumored move to Los Angeles.)

The person least impressed with Gurley's start? That would be the man himself. Today he sits on a ledge outside his team's locker room, feet dangling, dreadlocks spilling out of the gray hoodie pulled over his head. He stuffs an interview with utterances of "I don't know, bro," and "I can't explain that," and "I got nothing." Finally, after considerable prodding, he allows that he is indeed familiar with the comparisons. He's been the next someone since long before he played college ball at Georgia. He came up admiring backs like C.J. Spiller and Le'Veon Bell, but he emulated one above all others.

"It's a no-brainer," Gurley says. "Everybody wants to be like AP. But there's only one AP."

Adrian Peterson welcomes the comparison. "That young guy reminds me of myself," he says.

ADRIAN PETERSON was Gurley before Gurley. Labeled "fragile" after twice breaking his collarbone at Oklahoma, he slipped to the Vikings at No. 7 in the 2007 draft. The comparisons for him started early—Dickerson, Jim Brown—and he set out to prove them apt. In his professional debut Peterson grabbed a 60-yard touchdown reception. Four days later the nickname Purple Jesus first appeared on UrbanDictionary.com. In Week 8 of that rookie season he broke Jamal Lewis's single-game rushing record, amassing 296 yards against the Chargers.



"HE REMINDS YOU OF THREE OR FOUR DIFFERENT PEOPLE," SAYS SNEAD. "THAT'S WHAT'S RARE ABOUT TODD. IT TAKES FOUR BACKS TO BECOME ONE HIM."

Flash forward through six Pro Bowl appearances. Peterson became aware of Gurley in recent years through friends who raved about a runner worthy of association. For him, it was like looking into a distorted mirror. The new guy, who averaged a silly 7.4 yards per carry at Georgia in 2014, didn't quite match Peterson's lateral quickness, but he came close, despite being bigger. "He's like me," Peterson says, "in that people doubted whether he could play at the next level."

Gurley missed the Rams' first two games this season while he recovered from a left ACL injury, and he carried only six times for nine yards against the Steelers in Week 3. But in that inauspicious debut Snead saw everything he needed. "You're like, Wow—if we make *this* block, if he hits *this* crease,

/ **5.5** YDS PER CARRY, NO. 1 IN NFL (MIN. 100 CARRIES)

/ **4** STRAIGHT GAMES SCORING A RUSHING TD



BOUND FOR SUCCESS

Can the Rams leap over wild-card contenders like the Falcons and Seahawks? If Gurley keeps running like Peterson (far left), they just may.

1,867 PROJECTED YDS IN 16 GAMES, BASED ON SIX 2015 STARTS (RECORD: 2,105)

we're going to see the Todd Gurley we saw at Georgia," the GM says.

That's exactly what happened next: 146 yards against the Cardinals, 159 against the Packers, 128 and two touchdowns against the Browns, 133 and another score against the 49ers. Here he was, like Peterson before him, breaking records before he was fully broken in. Gurley hurdled defenders and ripped off four runs of 40-plus yards, more this season than any player not named AP. He's even excelled in pass protection. "I've always been scared of the Rams because their defense has been so good," says Warren Moon, Hall of Fame quarterback and now a radio analyst. "Gurley was the question mark. Nobody knew how effective he'd be. I don't think anybody thought he'd be this good this fast."

Snead's favorite play? It's not Gurley's 71-yard TD sprint against San Francisco, or his 55-yard scamper against Green Bay. Snead instead calls up on his laptop a third-and-one against Cleveland. It's the fourth quarter, the Rams are leading 17-6 and sitting on the Browns' 26. Everyone in the stadium knows what's coming, and yet Gurley takes the hand-off, shifts left, away from a defender in the backfield, finds the crease and falls forward three yards for a first down. It's an efficient run to keep a drive alive, and three plays later St. Louis pulls away for good on—of course—a 16-yard touchdown jaunt by Gurley.

Spectacular and subtle, Gurley impacts both sides of the ball. On offense he adds explosiveness (even with his late start, he's on pace for 15 runs of 20 yards or more; the Rams have averaged just nine per season this decade), helps control the clock (remember that Cleveland game?), picks up first downs (a commanding 5.5 per start) and demands attention from defenders who might otherwise rush the passer or double receivers (as if the Rams have any; here Gurley gets very little help). For St. Louis's defense he steals possessions from opposing QBs, affording his teammates extra rest.

"It's just a different feel," says James Laurinaitis, a Rams linebacker since 2009. "We're mentally tougher. We've been the youngest team in football. The difference now is experience.

"And Todd."

HERSHEL WALKER was Peterson before Peterson, even if his path to the NFL, through the USFL, was far more complicated. His comparisons—Brown, O.J. Simpson—came later, after he scored 12 touchdowns as an NFL rookie for Dallas in 1986, including two in his first start.

All is quiet at a Rams practice in early November—until a group clad in black Bellator MMA sweatshirts walks onto the field. Players point at the faction's most chiseled specimen, a 53-year-old retired running back who did 700 consecutive push-ups that morning and who weighs 227 pounds—just two more than when he retired, after the 1997 season.

Years ago, while he waited for a speaking engagement at an Air Force base in Delaware, Walker whittled away the hours by watching highlights on his laptop of Hall of Fame running back Gale Sayers. He never thought about that afternoon again—until he saw Gurley in college. Then it hit him, an unmistakable sense of déjà vu. *Man*, he thought, *that's Gale Sayers*.

Walker had first become aware of Gurley shortly before he committed to Walker's alma mater, Georgia, in 2012. Gurley's scholarship was

THE TIME GURLEY WADED INTO A TRAINING CAMP BRAWL, ICED-UP ACL AND ALL—**"THAT'S A KNIGHT TRAIT RIGHT THERE,"** SAYS SNEAD.

WHAT A STIFF

Where do the AP comps come from? Start with the stiff-arm, a weapon Peterson has wielded dangerously for years.



even financed in the name of Herschel's son, Christian, and he arrived on campus to much fanfare, as North Carolina's AP Player of the Year. "I noticed the balance he had, and the awareness," says Walker. "I felt like he could carry on the tradition and make Georgia—not USC—the capital of running backs. I knew he was special."

It took but one play for Gurley to prove his forerunner right: In the first quarter of the first game of his freshman season, Gurley returned a kickoff 100 yards for a score. He always was a fast learner, a natural talent. His parents claim he rode a 10-speed bicycle at age 3. He played tackle football in North Carolina at 6. He became the second freshman in Bulldogs history—Walker being the first—to run for at least 1,000 yards. "His blood pumps differently than most people's," says Georgia coach Mark Richt. "He's not your normal 'great back' even. From the waist down, he's built like a Clydesdale. He just glides."

ROBERT BECK FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (2)



In Athens, Gurley gained wide renown. He would goof off in workouts, then throw 400 pounds on a bar and squat five times with ease. He was a Heisman front-runner early in his junior year. “It felt,” says Aaron Murray, his UGA teammate, “like every time he touched the ball he scored.” But college was also Gurley’s first experience inside the fishbowl of athletic fame. In 2014 he admitted taking money for signing autographs, costing him four games and sparking national outrage over the NCAA’s rules. He became a flash point in the debate over college athletes’ rights: someone who couldn’t profit off his fame while the university cashed in. “The NCAA can pimp you out,” says Dickerson, a Hall of Fame back who had his own issues with the governing body for college sports. “But you can’t make a dime off your jersey. Who do you think makes that jersey? The player? Or the fabric? They make millions off these players like they’re slaves.”

Gurley returned on Nov. 15, against ninth-ranked Auburn, and racked up 138 rushing yards and a TD in a stunning 34–7 win. “It was, ‘Here he comes again,’” recalls Richt. “This beast.” But in the fourth quarter Georgia called a power run play; Gurley saw a hole, bounced left and tried to cut back. His left knee buckled. It felt, at first, like a hyperextension. But an MRI confirmed the ACL tear. “I was just like, ‘Here we go again,’” says Gurley. “Another setback.”

The injury solidified one of the comparisons: Peterson had shredded the ACL and MCL in his left knee in December 2011 and returned in nine months to win the ’12 MVP. The night he suffered that injury, Peterson told his father in the Vikings’

locker room that he would return to football faster than any player before him. “It’s all mind-set,” Peterson says. “People tell you it takes a year and a half, and that’s embedded in your mind. You can’t listen to them.”

Gurley approached his injury the same way: without emotion, confident in modern medicine. He declared for the NFL draft last December, then rehabbed at Georgia and trained at the EXOS training facility in Gulf Breeze, Fla., twice a day, five days a week. Looking back, he describes the process as “fun.”

“I mean, it could have been worse,” he says.

ERIC DICKERSON was Walker before Walker. He set the NFL rushing record for rookies with 1,808 yards in 1983, becoming the first in a long line of standout Rams rushers that would include Jerome Bettis, Marshall Faulk, Steven Jackson.

Dickerson first heard of Gurley a few years ago. At first, the name—pronounced “girlie”—stood out to him. Then he saw the kid play. “He’s a different kind of runner,” says Dickerson. “He has great speed, great moves, great instincts. I told everyone before the draft: He’s going to be a monster.”

Gurley wasn’t ready to perform at the scouting combine in February. Instead he talked. And talked. “I needed a tape recorder to play the same [spiel over and over],” he says. “My leg . . . my history. . . .” He trails off. He doesn’t say “the autographs,” but it’s implied. Ultimately, Gurley spoke with 24 teams. Some, like the Rams, who met with him for 15 minutes and then disappeared, showed little interest. For St. Louis, that was by design. The Rams, in fact, had Gurley atop their draft board—“Scenario A,” according to Snead.

Worried that running-back-needy teams would trade up for their man, St. Louis’s front office kept quiet. Silence of the Rams. Only Snead, coach Jeff Fisher and vice president of football operations Kevin Demoff knew how badly they wanted Gurley. “We definitely thought, This kid can be like Adrian,” says Snead, who keeps quotations tacked up on a bulletin board in his office. Gurley embodied one of them: ALWAYS FOCUS ON THE LONG TERM, BECAUSE THE SHORT TERM IS BY DEFINITION SHORT. The GM didn’t care how soon Gurley might play, only that he would. Eventually.

In the end Gurley and his bad knee fell to the Rams, for whom he represented the next step in a rebuilding process on a team constructed to fit Fisher’s specifications. The majority of the NFL may focus on passes and points, but Fisher had the oldest formula in football: Play good defense, run the ball, control the clock. With the Titans, from 1994 through 2009, he won first using a bulldozer, Eddie George, and then a sprinter, Chris Johnson. In Gurley he saw a combination of the two.

Gurley, meanwhile, progressed this spring and summer from rehab to noncontact drills to scout-team reps to regular practice. He focused only on football, watching television in his spare time. On his 21st birthday, in August, he celebrated not with a night out or a new car but by hunkering down at training camp. He did extra work with reserve running back Benny Cunningham after practices, retreating to the Jugs machine, going over pass protections, running routes. During first-team snaps he stood behind quarterback Nick Foles and the offense, studying play calls and the QB’s cadence.

Finally in late June, early July, Gurley says he felt close to 100% healthy. And yet he held out another two months. That way, when he did step on the field, he wouldn’t be concerned. “I wouldn’t have gone out there if I had a lack of confidence,” he says.

Foles saw the payoff the first time he handed off to the rookie. "He was so smooth," he says. "So effortless and natural." Laurinaitis was sold the first time Gurley faced a live defense: "You were like, Wow."

Snead was already a believer, convinced during a training camp practice against the Cowboys. Gurley hadn't participated in that scrimmage, but when a brawl between the two teams broke out, he grabbed his helmet and waded into the fray, his valuable left knee still wrapped in ice. "If you're developing knights, you look at that and you say, 'That's a knight trait right there,'" Snead says.

"Then you're like, 'O.K., can we please get him back on the sideline and out of the fray?'"

ON NOV. 8 the real Peterson and the next Peterson met on the same field in Minneapolis and played a throwback game that recalled earlier eras, before the NFL became dominated by prolific QBs and aerial offensive assaults. The two backs combined for 53 carries, 214 yards and two touchdowns in a knockdown contest won in overtime by Peterson's Vikings 21-18.

Their meeting, and the way the game unfolded, reinforced the value of a position that in recent years has been considered less and less important. In fact Peterson looks around the league and sees a renaissance for running backs. He points to Week 7, when a whopping 11 runners gained at least 110 yards. He notes that two backs—Gurley and the Chargers' Melvin Gordon—were selected in the first round this year, after consecutive drafts where none went that high (the previous first round to pass without a back being taken: 1963).

"It's supply and demand," says Peterson. "Outside of Aaron Rodgers, Tom Brady, guys like that, [the QB pool] is watered down. That's why I feel like we're going to transition back into a run-first league. That's what football is built on: Barry Sanders, Walter Payton, Jim Brown. It was poetic the way they ran."

Dickerson takes Peterson's notion one step further, toward the realm of conspiracy theory. "I don't know if it was teams or the league that tried to diminish the [running back]," he says, "but they did. They tried to underpay at the position. What you're seeing now is a shift the other way." Both men believe that the caliber of backs available today will lead more teams to run with increasing frequency. That's why their lineage will continue, because players like Dickerson, Walker, Peterson and Gurley keep coming up. As the Rams struggle to stay in the playoff race—Sunday's loss to the Bears put them at 4-5—they're careful with those comparisons, aware of their running back's injury history, elated with his start. Gurley, meanwhile, shelved the bulky knee brace before the Browns game in Week 6. He's declined many of the interview requests that pour into the Rams' p.r. department, remaining as grounded as he was upon his arrival in St. Louis.

For the most part, that has left Fisher to speak for his young back, and at the end of one early-November practice the coach fields another round of Gurley-related queries. He says he's never seen a player—any player—start the way this rookie has. He says he's never seen Gurley overwhelmed. He's trying to detail what cannot easily be explained. And then he glances over his shoulder and points at one of the Rams' practice fields. It's nearly empty. Everyone is gone, save for one player, who's catching passes from the Jugs machine.

The first Todd Gurley is hard at work. □



Chairman *Of the Bored*

WHERE HAVE ALL THE DIVAS GONE? TODAY'S WIDEOUTS ARE MOSTLY CUT FROM COLORLESS CLOTH, BUT THE FALCONS AREN'T LOOKING FOR PERSONALITY FROM **JULIO JONES**. HIS RELENTLESS BALL CATCHING IS ENTERTAINMENT ENOUGH

BY L. JON WERTHEIM

Photograph by
Rich Graessle
Icon Sportswire



OH, THIS ought to be good. The Falcons have won yet again, another victory in this unlikely season in which they've been surprising challengers for an NFC wild-card spot. And here in the back of a justifiably spirited locker room sits receiver Julio Jones, fresh from yet another extravagant performance. This fantasy football god, this serial NFL employee-of-the-week candidate, this GIF king, has turned in his standard shift. He's vacuumed in pass after

pass—even with three-elevenths of the opposing D targeting him—sometimes catching the ball in stride, other times contorting himself for you-have-to-be-kidding-me grabs.

A transcendent star, Jones would seem Atlanta's ideal spokesman, well-situated to describe the view from on high. Appearances, too, suggest that he ought to have plenty to say. Jones's taut musculature is practically a fashion statement, and his strikingly high cheek bones are set off by a coif that calls to mind a fez of curly locks. Even his name—which has a mellifluousness that the one on his birth certificate, Quintorris Lopez Jones, does not—screams flamboyance. Plus, he plays a position that, historically, does ostentation the way the Scandinavians do furniture.

Surely Jones is ready to offer a soliloquy on his greatness that will snidely dismiss those poor cornerbacks trying to cover him.

Jones clears his throat, as if preparing for a mike drop, while a reporter leans in. What did he think of that comeback victory?

“We just need to fight, and it’s never over till it’s over. We’re going to do whatever it takes.”

Um, right. How, then, did he assess his performance, precisely the kind of game that has led Falcons general manager Thomas Dimitroff to declare Jones “the best wide receiver” in the NFL?

“I just want to be there for my teammates, do whatever it takes, and at the end of the day I just want to win.”

O.K. And how does he size up this Falcons team?

“We’re very explosive on offense, but it’s a team game. When we’re not in such a rhythm, we know the defense will step up and make plays for us.”

So it goes. Jones is neither surly nor standoffish. Not in the slightest. More than an hour after the game he is still talking, smiling amiably, meeting the interrogator’s gaze with his own, reflexively beginning answers to questions with the accommodating phrase, “Oh, most definitely.” Sensitive to being perceived as cold or aloof, he says, “Someone wants to talk to me, I don’t mind. I sit down and talk with them. I’m just laid-back.”

But it’s more than that. It’s as if every phrase and every touch—his plain white, nondesigner shirt; his slouchy posture—is designed to deflect attention, to divert praise. Jones admits that he doesn’t trust easily. He views hype with skepticism. He won’t make his psyche available for public plumbing.

Fair enough. But can we at least be reassured that in the spirit of the previous generation of great wide receivers, Jones is enjoying the trappings of his success, that this strikingly handsome 26-year-old bachelor, the toast of Atlanta, is living large?

No, we cannot. After warning that his client is “not a man of many words,” one of Jones’s representatives adds that he doesn’t drink. On this night, after another big game, Jones leaves the Georgia Dome, drives home, plays some Ping-Pong, eats a light dinner and heads to sleep early. *Zzzzzz*, is right.

FOR YEARS the biggest divas in most major American cities didn’t perform at concert halls—they performed at football stadiums. Specifically, they lined up on the outside of the offensive formation and often, like their blathering mouths, went in motion. They shied from contact—unless you count the postgame thumping of their own chests—and were responsible for a good portion of the world’s consumption of alligator-skin products. Calling attention to oneself was almost an occupational requirement.

Here’s how the writer Rick Telander began a Jerry Rice profile in this magazine 20 years ago: “He’s here, in blue tights and a red windbreaker, as bitchy as a diva with a headache.” Andre (Bad Moon) Rison, a predecessor of Jones’s in Atlanta, reveled in mocking the aforementioned

THIS SERIAL NFL
EMPLOYEE-OF-THE-WEEK
CANDIDATE, THIS GIF KING,
WOULD SEEM ATLANTA’S IDEAL
SPOKESMAN. THINK AGAIN.



GOAT, pronouncing his name effeminately, *Jay-ree*. Michael (“Can I tell you who I am?”) Irvin was a primary receiver as prima donna, as was Terrell Owens, whose assorted look-at-me acts included public sit-up demonstrations. Randy Moss once conceded, “I play when I want to.” Keyshawn Johnson demanded the damn ball—but he might not even have been the most pretentious receiver in his own family. His younger cousin is Chad Johnson, who rechristened himself after his uniform number, 85. In (flawed) Spanish.

Maybe more than for his receiving, Ochocinco will be remembered for his scene-stealing performance in the Bengals’ 2009 season of *Hard Knocks*, on HBO. Which is no surprise. “It wasn’t like we focused on wide receivers,” says Ross Greenburg, the show’s original executive producer. “But usually the play-

KEVIN D. LILES/ATLANTA FALCONS

10 Things We Think As We Approach The NFL Homestretch

1. OLD IS THE NEW YOUNG One of the biggest losers thus far, other than the Browns: Father Time. It could be the Pilates (Drew Brees), the 9 p.m. bedtimes (Tom Brady) or the occasional glass of a fine cab sauv (Charles Woodson), but some of the NFL’s most senior players



We can speculate as to why. While football has always been a festival of violence, with today's increased focus on the physical toll that players endure, does it make sense to run your mouth, puff your chest and arm the defense with another reason to drill you as you're going across the middle? Why alienate yourself from your teammates? Haven't social media and the Internet spanking machine had a chilling enough effect on outrageous instincts? Greenburg's view: "Guys now realize that dazzling with your skills is the way to get more respect."

Whatever the reason, the evidence of this shift is overwhelming. In Denver, Demaryius Thomas may have caught 365 balls over the past four seasons, but he still asserts, "I am not a superstar." In Cincinnati, A.J. Green recently told SI's Dan Patrick that he likes to relax by . . . watching the Animal Planet show *Treehouse Monsters*. In Detroit, Megatron is a fitting nickname for Calvin Johnson's posthuman skills—but also for his robotic disposition.

Add Arizona's Larry Fitzgerald here, too. Last March, sans entourage, Fitzgerald drove four hours from Phoenix to Indian Wells, Calif., to attend a pro tennis tournament as a fan. Without special dispensation, he walked

the grounds like any other visitor and went unaccommodated. "Actually," he says, "a few people asked me if I knew where the bathrooms were or how to get to parking lot D." And what did the highest-scoring NFL receiver over the last decade say in response? "Oh, I tried to direct them as best I could."

STILL, AS humility goes, you—much like an NFL secondary—would have a hard time keeping pace with Julio Jones. Do a quick survey of Jones's teammates, and two themes emerge: his absurd level of athleticism and a comparably absurd level of modesty. "A humble freak," is how tight end Jacob Tamme puts it. Says guard Chris Chester, a 10-year NFL veteran, "With Julio, it's one of those deals where you appreciate what he's doing and *how* he's doing it. He wears his greatness well."

Jones has had plenty a lot of time to prepare. For all the unexpected success stories in the NFL—draft-day afterthoughts who, Julian Edelman-style, blossom into stars—Jones has long confronted the highest expectations. By his senior year at Foley (Ala.) High he was generally considered the best

MILLENNIAL FALCON

The top WR recruit in his high school class, Jones was soaring long before he reached the NFL.

makers were the stars. It was like they knew how to build a mythology around themselves."

To deal in understatement: That archetype is dying. You could make the case that in this era of spread offenses and 40 passes per game, the wide receiver has never been more important. Yet its practitioners have never cut more humble figures, with the most valuable being the least voluble. Coaches will tell you that today's wideouts are lower maintenance. ("The position has *changed*," says Falcons coach Dan Quinn.) Defensive backs will tell you that it's quieter on the line. (All-Pro Jets cornerback Darrelle Revis runs through the top receivers and cites Dez Bryant of the Cowboys as the lone trash-talker.) Even using *Hard Knocks* as a barometer, how many seasons have elapsed since a receiver broke out as a colorful character?

JASON GETZ/USA TODAY SPORTS (JONES); MIKE EHRLICH/GETTY IMAGES (NEWTON)

will have an outsized influence on how this season shakes out. A list of passing leaders—Eli Manning, 35; Philip Rivers, 35; Carson Palmer, 35; Brees, 36; Brady, 38—could be a call sheet for a Flomax ad. It's a reminder that at this damnably cerebral position, excellence often corresponds

to tenure. Also remarkable on the list of Methuselahs is Woodson (39), the Raiders safety who, in his spare time, is a well-regarded Napa Valley winemaker. Like the aforementioned shapers of the playoff picture, he knows something about improving with age.

2. YA GOTTA BELIEVE

Every year there's a team that people refuse to believe in—until they have to. Hello, Panthers. They're balanced (No. 4 in points scored, No. 6 in points allowed), and they play only one more team with a winning record—the division-rival Falcons, whom they face twice.



3. ALSO: CAM

Newton will force MVP voters to reexamine the definition of *valuable*. Look past his subpar completion percentage (56.3) to a depleted WR corps. **Carolina's QB** is morphing before our eyes into a weapon the likes of which we have not yet seen.

receiver in the country. His signing-day commitment was a national news event. When he chose Alabama, he was BMOC before he even arrived OC, receiving write-in votes in an election for student government president before he ever enrolled in classes. As it was, he was elected to the student senate, a nice honor considering that Jones did not actually *run* for office.

He did run plenty on the field, though, mostly to open spots when he hauled in passes. At 6' 3" he was a big target. With sub-4.4 40 speed, he was a fast target. Harder to quantify: his ability to avoid defenders like a fish slithering past boulders on the way downstream. It was also at Alabama that he picked up his jones for Ping-Pong. It started as recreation in his freshman dorm. When he realized it would help his hand-eye coordination and actually benefit his football, it veered toward obsession.

At the 2011 NFL draft Dimitroff gave up five picks (to the Browns) to choose Jones sixth, a bold bit of deal-making that was soon justified. "Remember, that was the [summer of the] lockout, so we didn't really see him in the off-season," says Mike Smith, the Falcons' coach at the time. "We finally get to training camp and on the first day it was, *Whoa*. It was apparent he was playing at a different level."

Jones led all rookies in touchdown receptions; by his second year he was double-teamed as a matter of routine, and still he put up 1,198 receiving yards. His third season was a wash because of a broken right foot. But last year—even as the Falcons floundered—he reasserted himself, catching 104 balls for 1,593 yards. "Athletically, he's like a different species," says Hall of Fame-bound tight end Tony Gonzalez, who played with Jones in Atlanta from 2011 to '13. "You know, one in a million? He's one in a *planet*. And I say this having played 17 years in the NFL." Two weeks before this season began, the Falcons signed Jones to a five-year, \$71 million extension with \$47 million guaranteed.

When Quinn took over last February, he was fully aware of Jones's lavish skills. He'd heard about that understated personality. What he didn't know



BEST MAN, QUINN'S

How's this for a hand-me-down: The Falcons' first-year coach inherited his new team's all-time leader in yards per game, 92.4.

about: Jones's advanced football cortex. "He's really bright football-wise," says the coach. "In meetings he has the rare ability to stay locked in for a long period of time, and that's not an easy trait to have. Other guys wander—*O.K., I know this route*. He doesn't lose focus."

Quinn was also struck by Jones's low-maintenance personality. "I was on the team with Terrell Owens in San Francisco, and yeah, those two couldn't be more different," says Quinn, a 49ers assistant from 2001 to '04. "Julio's a great player, but he doesn't need to be told he's great. He's an unbelievably cool teammate—and I'd like you to have that in your story somewhere if you can."

That coolness has Jones mentoring younger players, like Devonta Freeman, the ascendant second-year running back

whom he introduced to a tennis-ball drill designed to improve hand-eye. Part of the wisdom Jones tries to impart: "I understand consistency," he says, in what passes for boasting. "I hold myself accountable. I look at myself and make sure I'm doing the right things—getting the right sleep, eating right."

Above all, what matters is the way he plays. The nifty catches (80 of them through Sunday, No. 1 in the NFL) and touchdowns (six; seventh among receivers) go noticed by fans, and by Fantasy Nation. Beyond the 1,029 yards, second-most in the league, his teammates notice nuances. During a fourth-quarter possession in a 25–19 Week 5 win over the Redskins, Jones, ignoring

FROM TOP: KEVIN D. LILES/ATLANTA FALCONS; GREGORY SHAMUS/GETTY IMAGES

4. IT'S IN THE CARDS

As for a real win-it-all favorite: Start with the most complete team, Arizona. Chalk that up to 1) **Palmer** and his dangerous weapons, 2) an aggressive, talented defense, 3) a no-fear coach in Bruce Arians and 4) the fact that this team hasn't put one starter on IR. Yet.



5. DON'T DOUBT THE 'BOYS

It's crazy, but Dallas is not done. Despite a 2–7 record and a dysfunctional locker room, the Cowboys will be heard from in the NFC East race. With Tony Romo (maybe) returning against Miami, Dallas could conceivably finish 6–1 and win a weak division at 8–8.

6. FRESH BLOOD

Beware the teams that already canned their coaches. New faces and newly inspired players in Miami (which still faces the Jets, Giants, Colts and Patriots) and Tennessee (Raiders, Jets, Pats, Texans and Colts) are bound to shape the playoff picture.



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Keeping Up, Jones Is

Through 58 games, only one player in history has outpaced the Falcons' receiver in terms of yards

1. Lance Alworth 5,651
2. Julio Jones 5,359
3. Charlie Hennigan 4,906
4. Randy Moss 4,897
5. A.J. Green 4,792
6. Jerry Rice 4,774
7. Anquan Boldin 4,710
8. Torry Holt 4,578
9. Isaac Bruce 4,529
10. Bob Hayes 4,416

HALL OF FAMER



a right-hamstring injury, threw a nasty block to create space for Freeman. He commanded double teams as he ran his routes. (“That means I’m doing my job,” he says.) And on the last snap of the series, he followed a running play and dived onto a teammate’s fumble in the end zone, surely the most unusual of his 33 career NFL touchdowns.

This, too, differentiates Jones and his contemporaries from the precious receivers of the previous

generation. Quinn points out that as the position evolves, more receivers line up not just on the outside but also in the slot. This confounds defenses but leads to far more contact in the course of a game. Which is fine by the 220-pound Jones. “You can’t pray and worry at the same time,” he says flatly. “I pray—and that’s it. I play, and whatever happens, happens.”

Jones considers this. And then the finest receiver in football delivers what may as well be an aria for today’s anti-diva pass catchers. “Everyone leads in a different way,” he says. “It’s easy to say something—I’m gonna run and catch this ball. But are you gonna say it? Or do it? There’s a difference.” □

7. COOL IT ON THE KICKERS Despite widespread alarm early on, the elongated extra point is *not* scrambling the delicate psyches of placekickers. Last year they made 84.0% of FG attempts. Through 10 weeks, they’ve converted 447 of 552, or 85.3%. Much ado about nothing.

8. ORANGE CRUSHED? Not yet. But consider: The Broncos have the fourth-toughest remaining schedule, per Football Outsiders. With the Bengals and the Pats already up on them, Peyton Manning (if healthy) could face two cold-weather road games to get to Super Bowl 50.



9. EVERYONE’S A WINNER Well, not technically, as we’re talking about a lot of squads with losing records. But 25 out of 32 teams (26 if you count Dallas) can seriously be considered in playoff contention. Even **Alex Smith’s** surging Chiefs, who started 1-5, are in a comfy position.

10. UPSET CITY Yes, we have a record trio of undefeated teams at Week 11 (through Sunday). But can you count on any of these three in January? The Pats’ O-line (shoddy) and the Bengals’ and Panthers’ playoff records (spotty, at best) suggest some postseason surprises are coming.

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OPTION 1



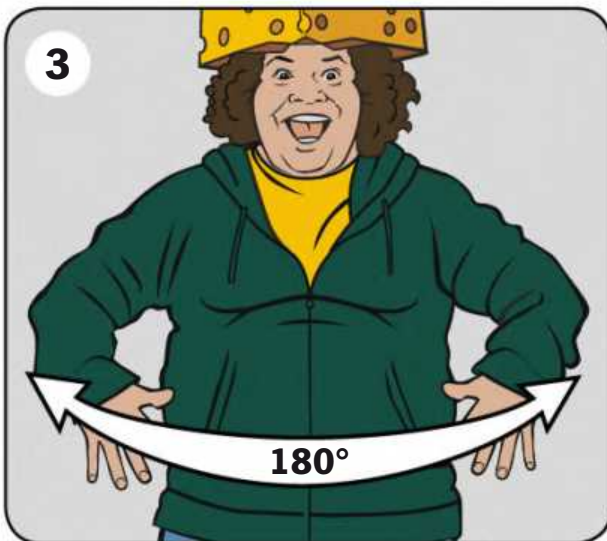
Attract attention of intended subject by shouting "Hey Rodgers!"¹

¹Regardless of their actual name.



Place both hands over solar plexus.² In a high pitch, exclaim "DISCOUNT DOUBLE CHECK!"

²Also known as breadbasket, tum-tum or front porch.



Perform a sweeping motion, coming to a complete stop at the 180-degree point.³

³Taking care to avoid double check-related hyperextension.



Complete sequence by returning to start position. If ignored by subject,⁴ return to Step 1 and repeat.

⁴Example: Aaron Rodgers

OPTION 2

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Field of Dreams

AS PART OF AN ONGOING SERIES IMAGINING THE NEXT 50 YEARS OF FOOTBALL, SI AND WIRED ENVISION THE STADIUM OF THE FUTURE

□ EIGHTY YEARS AGO men in gray suits and spiffy hats gathered in stadium bowls and sat stoically while they watched football. Sure, that's far from today's live NFL experience, but you can expect the stadium of the future to present an even more dramatic shift in football consumption. Such is our rate of progress.

Envisioning exactly what that future might look like requires imagination rooted in the practical direction of current innovations. For this SI turned to the world's largest sports architecture firm, Kansas City-based Populous. "We think about these stadiums every day—how they're changing, how our fans are changing," says Scott Radevic, Populous's senior principal and architect.

So what can we expect? Here's Populous's take on the NFL stadium of tomorrow.

WE ARE THE WORLD

RADECIC REMEMBERS an NFL owner once telling him that only 7% of NFL fans will ever walk through the doors of a stadium. As the league pushes toward a larger global footprint—think London and Mexico City, for now—and grows its international base, that percentage of attending fans will only drop. Enter Populous's concept



of "remote live sites," NFL-branded locations around the world that will function hand in hand with similar locations within the league's stadiums. "People love to have a social experience, they love to be together," says Radevic. "If they can't be *at* the stadium, these remote live sites will engage fans."

Fully immersed in the technology of the day, these live sites in urban locations would give faraway fans the opportunity to interact with a live game. Massive screens and ribbon boards would relay the sights and sounds of the in-stadium experience. But don't

think of these as glorified sports bars. Beyond the game, stations within each site would allow for learning—critical for a growing international audience that's still picking up the nuances of the NFL product—and interacting. Those stations might include opportunities to predict future plays based on the game's flow, interactive virtual-reality experiences (including putting the viewer in the game being watched) and even hologram projections of the contest, all of it flowing around multiple bars and lounge experiences, mixing technological interactivity with social elements.

"No longer do people want to be just spectators—they want to be participants," says Radevic. "And this is all

possible. You can be in another country and still find a way to participate in a live event."

URBAN OUTFITTERS

DON'T EXPECT to see 80,000-seat megastadiums in the future. The idea of the single-purpose NFL building is already starting to erode, says Populous architect Greg Sherlock, and it will completely fade away in the long term.

The venue of the future, he suggests, will hit more than one need in a city: "Could the building serve a dual purpose? Integrate the community in rec-


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reation and entertainment?” Populous’s predictors say yes; they expect that in the future they’ll be designing stadiums in urban centers with functions that extend outside football, making them viable 365 days per year.

This goes beyond what we now think of as multiuse. Imagine a downtown office tower that on most days holds, say, a law firm. On one side that office faces a busy downtown street. But on the opposite side is a football field. Now you have office spaces that can be turned into suites ① on NFL Sundays.

How will fans access this inner-city, multipurpose Colosseum? Populous envisions large mass-transit centers connected directly to stadiums, with train rides replacing the old soccer-style marches that fans make into arenas. And like the office tower that looms large over one end zone, perhaps another section of the stadium has a massive parking garage attached to it—only instead of walling off the garage from the action, as we see today, that garage serves the city’s commuters during the week and becomes a massive tailgating venue ② on weekends, with fanatics driving right up ③ to their vantage point.

Building on the idea of urban connectivity and entertainment, Populous sees the stadium’s fringes serving as a downtown park ④ on off-days, allowing dog walkers and stroller pushers a regular connection to the venue and giving the city a better use of space. “The urban park becomes a place,” says Radecic, “where this future stadium might integrate the community.”

IN THE HOUSE

THERE WILL be seats. There will *always* be seats. There just won’t be as many. As stadium sizes shrink to fit within urban cores and mesh



with their many uses, we’ll come to expect something like 30,000 lower-bowl seats ⑤ for the more traditional fans who still want to stay close to the action (even if they often leave their seats in order to enjoy the rest of the stadium’s unique experiences).

But that upper bowl? It won’t be anything like it is now. In its place:

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fresh perspectives and entirely new vantage points—the office tower on one side, the tailgating parking garage on another. Altogether the football experience is bound to feel more like today’s baseball stadium, where you can meander around the field ⑥ without ever losing contact with the game. Imagine a mixture of city bars with back-patio or rooftop areas that activate for each game, providing views onto the field. Or maybe boardwalk areas that allow people to walk right through the venue. *Hey, if the city has a waterway, why not let kayakers ⑦ float right up?* Populous asks. You want premiums? On game day that helipad atop the corner office ⑧ can access the most expensive seat in town. And if you can’t afford that high-up view, Populous imagines a sort of drone zone, where stadiumgoers can rent camera-equipped drones ⑨ and create personalized live-game feeds

from up high.

The variety of experiences will prove limitless, and they’ll be dictated heavily by the local culture. The idea of the upper bowl will take on a new meaning, with potentially dozens of “neighborhoods,” each with a specific game-day feel and non-game-day use. This focus on social gatherings will allow people to grow more connected with each other over the sport they love. “Fewer people are going to sit in a seat,” says Radecic. “More people [will be] up and moving around.”

The way Populous sees it, the root desire of watching a game in a live environment with like-minded fans will not have changed 50 years from now. But the way we accomplish that will. Just don’t expect gray suits and spiffy hats.

—Tim Newcomb



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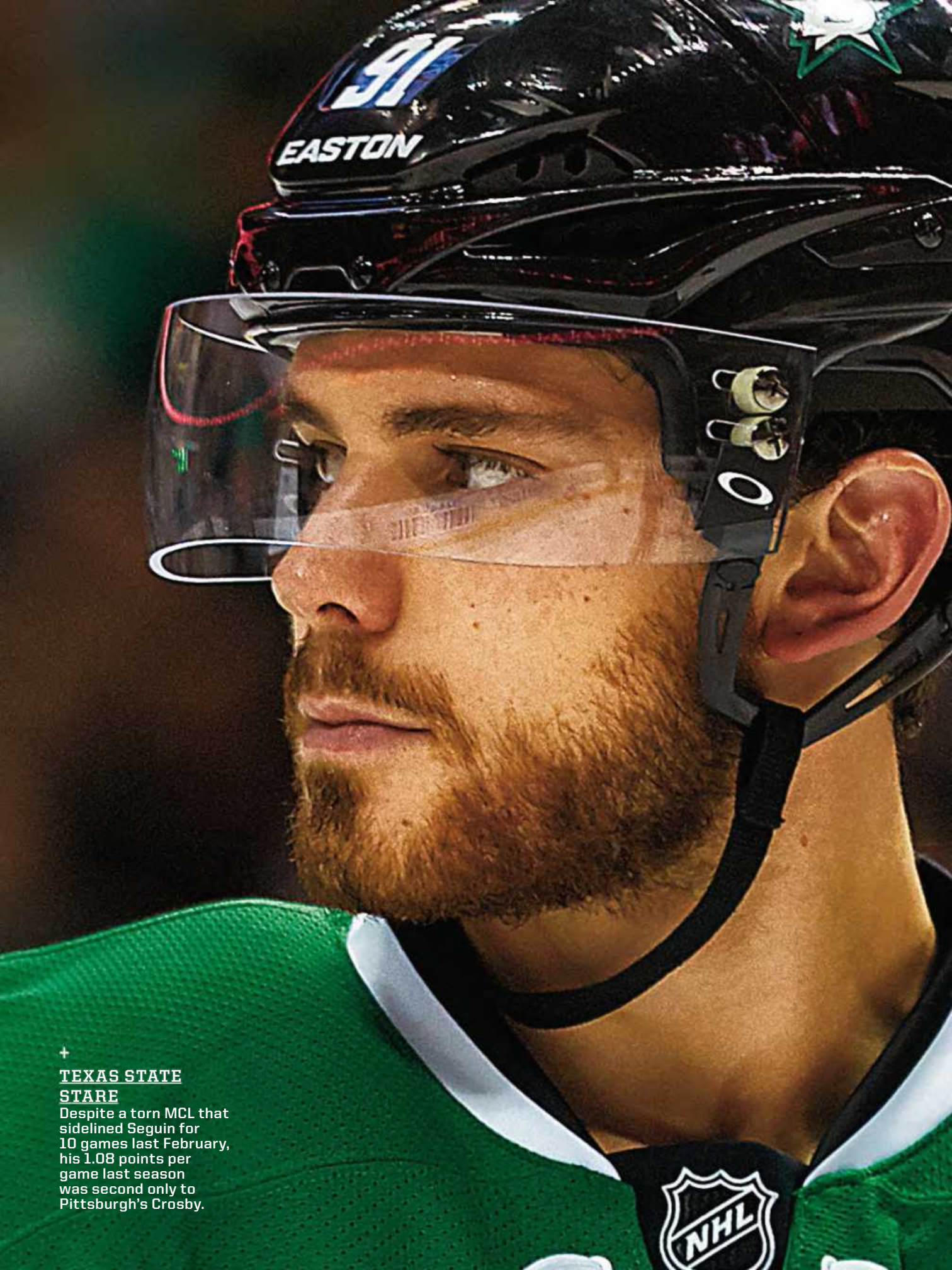
BECAUSE EVERYONE IS A FAN

D I G I T A L N E T W O R K

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+

**TEXAS STATE
STARE**

Despite a torn MCL that sidelined Seguin for 10 games last February, his 1.08 points per game last season was second only to Pittsburgh's Crosby.

SHOOTING TO BE A STAR

THREE YEARS AFTER AN ACRIMONIOUS SPLIT FROM BOSTON, DALLAS CENTER **TYLER SEGUIN** HAS CLIMBED TO THE TOP OF THE NHL—AND HE'S PLANNING TO GO EVEN HIGHER

BY ALEX PREWITT

Photographs by
Darren Carroll for Sports Illustrated



Here he was shaking hands with Kobe Bryant, LeBron James and the Captain.

The party ended after a few hours, everyone peeling off for other events around the city, but the experience stuck with Seguin long after he returned to his off-season home in downtown Toronto. He had tried watching how these superstars acted, all of them versatile in their talents, branded in their image, famous beyond their sports. He admired—even envied—what he saw. “Jeter was probably my biggest, like, *whoa*,” Seguin says. “It’s crazy because you think these guys are like gods, but they still put on their pants the same way we do. They’re just people, but it’s how they carry themselves.”

Then again, it’s not as if Seguin was an undeserving guest on that terrace. The second pick in the NHL draft in 2010, he kissed the Stanley Cup with the Bruins less than a year later, at 19. Last May he won gold with Team Canada at the IIHF world championships, leading the tournament with nine goals. And now, in his third season with Dallas, he shares the league lead in points (26) with Chicago’s Patrick Kane and had nine goals at week’s end. Since 2013–14, only two NHL players—Crosby and Seguin’s teammate Jamie Benn—have more points, and no one has averaged more



ON A MID-JULY afternoon during the busiest summer of his life, Tyler Seguin received a text message revealing the location of a private party hosted by Derek Jeter. The announcement, kept secret to keep paparazzi away, directed Seguin to an intimate, closed-off patio atop a Los Angeles hotel. There, at a gathering thrown by Jeter’s media venture, *The Players’ Tribune*, mingled pro athletes in town for the ESPYs the next night. No outside guests were allowed, and Seguin, the Stars’ gifted center, was the only hockey player present. He had been awed when he met icons like Sidney Crosby and Alex Ovechkin at his first NHL All-Star Game in 2012, but this was something else entirely. He had never met so many luminaries from so many other sports at one time.

TYLER SEGUIN

first assists or points per 60 minutes. Boyishly handsome and the owner of the most dangerous slap shot his coach has ever seen, Seguin, now 23, makes for a perfectly marketable combination: the inked up, all-world sniper with a disarming smile.

“He’s cognizant of who he is, what he wants to do and how he wants to portray himself,” his agent, Ian Pulver, says. “It cuts against the grain sometimes, the traditional Canadian way of being. Some people don’t like it, find it a little too edgy. [But] he’s exactly what the sport needs.”

In the buttoned-up NHL, where attention-deflecting humility is championed, Seguin consciously embraces an alternate image—that of a selfie-snapping superstar for the millennial age.

“He’s not your typical hockey player,” friend and Flyers defenseman Michael Del Zotto says. “He’s got that edge to him. He’s got the two sleeve tattoos [and a] kind of playboy mentality.”

When he wasn’t fishing with friends in lakeside Ontario or working out five days a week inside a windowless concrete room in Toronto, Seguin spent his summer on the move. He filmed several cameos for a sequel to the 2012 hockey movie *Goon*, hurling f-bombs at actor Seann William Scott. He partied at the actual Playboy Mansion—dress code: sleepwear—and posed naked for ESPN’s *The Body Issue*. After Team Canada’s training camp in Vienna and the worlds in Prague, he vacationed with friends in Amsterdam, London and Paris, where he took a selfie with the Eiffel Tower. Though the monument shouldn’t feel special. At this point, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Seguin has smiled into the cellphones of half of Dallas’s hockey fans.

Nor is it unreasonable to believe that Seguin can indeed transcend the NHL and become, in the words of his manager, John Walters, “the next David Beckham or the Cristiano Ronaldo of hockey.” To help him get there, Seguin retains a Miami-based publicist, who represents Gisele Bunchen; an endorsement agent in New York City whose only other sports cli-



IT ISN'T UNREASONABLE TO BELIEVE THAT SEGUIN CAN BECOME, IN THE WORDS OF HIS MANAGER, “**THE DAVID BECKHAM OR CRISTIANO RONALDO OF HOCKEY.**”

ROOKIE DREAM

Just two years after tasting success in his first season with the Bruins (left), Seguin was traded to Dallas.

ent is Tom Brady; and a financial manager who oversees his \$5.75 million annual salary. The members of Team Seguin, as they jokingly call themselves, work toward a mission their boss explains this way: “It’s always going to be hockey first, it’s always going to be training first, but why not do everything else, too?” Maybe he’ll start a clothing line, or buy a junior team, or open an Italian restaurant—all ideas he and Walters have discussed.

“The sky’s the limit,” Del Zotto says before adding, “It all depends how it goes on the ice.”

For a charismatic bachelor literally living in the former home of Dallas’s last hockey superstar, for the top-line center on the Western Conference’s No. 1 team, the merging of sports and celebrity can be thorny. “Very, very tricky,” Seguin says, sitting in the team lounge after a recent practice. When asked why, he pauses, as though the answer should be obvious. “I mean. . .,” he laughs. “Look at my history.”

THE NEW face of the franchise was in town for the first time, so Stars GM Jim Nill invited Seguin to dinner the night before his introductory press conference in July 2013. They talked about moving him from the wing, where he played in Boston, to center, about working on face-offs and playing with Benn. And while Nill says he wasn’t concerned about the stories and rumors that followed Seguin out of Boston, he was interested enough to hear the player tell his side.

As Seguin was making the eight-hour drive from Boston to Toronto on July 5—he had learned about the trade while partying on Cape Cod the day before—the *Boston Herald* released a story that labeled him a “problem child.” According to the paper, the Bruins’ front office was concerned that he had spent too many late nights about town, was spotted too many times dancing shirtless on bars. To that point, Seguin’s public transgressions had included a homophobic tweet in



IN S-TYLER

Behind Seguin's league-leading 26 points, Dallas is averaging an NHL-high 3.61 goals per game.

April 2013 that he later apologized for and a missed morning skate (he overslept) during his second season, relatively minor blips on the news spectrum.

Then-GM Peter Chiarelli declared at a news conference announcing the trade that jettisoning Seguin “was nothing about extracurricular activities,” and a former Bruins official says now that excessive partying “was not the reason we traded Tyler.” But three months after the deal an episode of *Behind the B*, a Bruins-produced documentary series, captured Chiarelli and other top brass discussing whether to trade Seguin with surprising candor. Director of player personnel Scott Bradley raised Seguin's one goal in 22 postseason games and questioned his toughness and enthusiasm for puck battles. Before echoing those concerns, team president Cam Neely said, “There's a couple issues from my perspective. There's the off-ice and on-ice.” The implication dangled: If the cap-strapped Bruins were troubled only by Seguin's play, they might have showed

more patience with the player they had showered with a six-year, \$34.5 million extension less than a year earlier.

Nill pulled off the seven-player stunner just nine weeks after he took over as the Stars' GM, capping a franchise-wide overhaul following a fifth straight season without a playoff berth. Dallas's logo and jerseys had been redesigned in a color called Victory Green. Nill, formerly Detroit's assistant GM, and coach Lindy Ruff (from Buffalo) had come aboard, forming an affable and experienced tandem on the hockey side. “I knew I was right in the middle of a Day One rebuild, reborn organization,” Seguin says. “I was either going to thrive in it, or I was going to fail, and that was going to be it for me. That was a big point in my career.”

Seguin, for his part, could strengthen Dallas's offense. In 2011–12 he led the Bruins with 67 points despite averaging less than 17 minutes on the ice. When he met with Nill, Seguin asked for film of Benn to study, which impressed his new boss. Nill

reminded Seguin that Dallas was adding him to its core, and with that came certain expectations. “He was a young guy,” Nill says. “He just needed some guidance. Everybody needs some guidance.”

He summed up his advice by telling the budding star, “Never change.” In other words, be the 11-year-old who arrived to his first meeting with Walters wearing a white T-shirt, a tucked-in Kenyon Martin Nuggets jersey and hair with blond, frosted tips. Or the Seguin who has a microscopic stick figure inked inside his armpit hair because the tattoo artist said that was the most painful spot. Be the Seguin who last summer would spend seven hours on his *Body Issue* shoot, “straight-up naked the whole time.” For one set of photos he rode an ice resurfacer and licked a fruit Popsicle.

In another, his personal popsicle hid behind a yellow rubber ducky.

Sitting at his desk at the Stars' practice facility last month, Ruff hopped between praise for and caution about a player he believes can “dominate the

league.” Ruff fondly recalled the previous night, when Seguin cleanly won two critical offensive zone face-offs that helped set up Patrick Sharp's tying goal against the Canucks. But, the coach also says, “his personality is prone to making a big mistake. He might take a picture or say something and all of a sudden . . .” Ruff bangs his hand into his fist. “. . . there's a tweet or a social media blog or something, and you'll go, Tyler, did you really say that? In the spur of the moment, he might've. That's his personality. But that sometimes isn't a bad thing. He's expressing himself. Just try to say the right thing and do the right thing.”

LAST WINTER, around the time his *Players' Tribune* article about his split from Boston went live—“Moving On,” the headline read—Seguin decided to buy a house in Dallas. He visited more than a dozen places but couldn't shake the memory of the French country mansion on Mimosa Lane, better

**“HE’S NOT YOUR
TYPICAL HOCKEY
PLAYER,” DEL ZOTTO
SAYS. “HE’S GOT THAT
EDGE TO HIM. THAT’S
WHAT APPEALS TO
THE FANS.”**

suited for a traditional family than a single hockey player: 7,250 square feet with a fire pit, outdoor bar, cabana, wine cellar and swimming pool. Plus, the seller was Stars Hall of Famer Mike Modano.

After Seguin made his \$1.925 million purchase, the symbolism—substitute house key for franchise torch—escaped no one, least of all Brad Alberts, the Stars’ chief revenue officer. Since Seguin’s arrival, Alberts notes, full-season ticket equivalents have almost doubled, and more than 3,000 SEGUIN 91 jerseys have been sold at the team store, which will soon hawk hats with his personal TS logo. “Seguin Selfies”—yes, his brand has coopted duck faces too—are now a pregame tradition at American Airlines Center, where Seguin takes a picture with a lucky fan after warmups. And so it is that Alberts compares Seguin with the franchise’s greatest player: “He’s charismatic, good-looking, übertalented. He reminds me of Modano in a lot of ways.”

Seguin has his mellow tendencies too. Whenever he had a free weekend last summer, he drove two hours from Toronto to Georgian Bay, to a friend’s cottage on an island reachable only by water taxi. They rose before dawn, cleaned whatever they caught, napped until the afternoon, ate dinner and returned to the water by dusk, when the walleye nipped best. He went eight or nine times before reporting to training camp. “I find it way more fun than even going out or anything,” he says.

He understands how improbable this sounds. “It’s an automatic assumption that people have,” he says. “At this point people are still talking, and that’s on their own time. I’m happy where I am. Being here [in Dallas] is one of the best things to ever happen to me.”

So he works, strengthening the foundation upon which everything else will be built. Matt Nichol, his off-season trainer, often modified exercises because Seguin blistered his hands from shooting too many pucks. This summer he deadlifted 400 pounds for the first time. Seguin maintains a body-fat percentage under five, and he has abs Nichol describes as “GQ 18-pack.” And on the morning



PLAYBOY WONDER

In his busy off-season, Seguin (right, with Del Zotto) found time to visit the Playboy mansion.

he left for the ESPYs, Seguin awoke around 4 a.m. to, as he calls it, *J.J. Watt*.

A few months earlier, when the Texans’ siege engine had been in Toronto for a commercial shoot, he requested a predawn session with Nichol. “I’m not even sure if that’s early,” the trainer says of Watt’s 4:30 a.m. ask. “I think that’s still late.” But Watt showed up and ripped through the workout, and a new verb was born. *Matty, can we J.J. Watt on Friday?* And thus, hours before rubbing elbows with Jeter, Seguin *J.J. Watt*ed a personal-best five pull-ups with 90 pounds dangling from his waist.

As one former Boston teammate puts it, “If you’re doing [endorsements and appearances], you better be able to back it up. If he’s not performing, then guys would be all over him. . . . But he’s f---ing performing. He’s earning his f---ing money.”

ON HALLOWEEN afternoon, with the Sharks in town, Americans Airlines Center was crawling with zombies, some of them dressed in Seguin jerseys. That evening the undead witnessed a ninth Dallas victory in 11 games—the team’s best start in nine years. A few days later Seguin pummeled his old Bruins in Boston with a hat trick, his sixth with Dallas. He would also make a fan cry with joy by tossing her a puck on her 16th birthday.

“He’s a melting pot,” Demers says. “When the off-ice and the on-ice collides, when you can manage that marketability and still perform on the ice, it’s a dangerous combo.”

In “Moving On,” Seguin wrote that he felt the Bruins “gave up on me too early,” but after the initial shock faded, he found the quieter rhythm of Dallas a better fit. There were parks for his dogs and malls he could wander without someone posting his location on Twitter. He is famous here, busy here, but not overwhelmingly so.

He fills the free hours with calls to Team Seguin and receives monthly email updates. He has a mortgage and kitchen countertops he chose himself. He has a foundation, which hosts sled hockey players in his private suite for every home game. He has the last two lines of William Ernest Henley’s “Invictus” tattooed on his right arm: *I am the master of my fate/I am the captain of my soul*.

“I want to build some type of brand or empire for my future so when I get away from the game, I can be like these other guys, like Derek Jeter, and have events and still be connected somehow,” Seguin says. “There is going to be life after hockey.”

But when he’s on the ice, hockey is life. A few hours before the Stars took down San Jose 5–3, Seguin looped around as warmups ended, helmetless and hair slicked back. The house lights dimmed as he stepped through the bench door, last off the ice as usual. Before disappearing down the tunnel, he stopped and knelt beside a young fan near the bench. He flashed that disarming smile—*click*—for another Seguin Selfie. □



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DUAL TREAT

Mayfield, a walk-on transfer from Texas Tech, accounted for 346 yards and four TDs to help Oklahoma break Baylor's 20-game home winning streak.

MATH



COLLEGE FOOTBALL

The 10 teams of the Big 12 put up crazy numbers, but they're still not sure if zero defeats add up to one playoff bid. Oklahoma State hopes that it does, while Baylor and Oklahoma look to test a one-loss equation

BY ALBERT CHEN

Photographs by
Greg Nelson for Sports Illustrated



ALONG THE BANKS of the Brazos River a new-age football cathedral of brick and steel and green-tinted glass glows like a slot machine under the darkening Texas sky. Inside, the Saturday-night extravaganza begins with a billowing cloud of smoke that shrouds the players' entrance, and fireworks that rocket from the rafters and paint the sky in blinding Technicolor. Music that belongs to a warehouse rave pulses through the stadium, and the Baylor players, outfitted in all black, emerge from the cloud in a mad dash toward midfield, where they run through a blazing ring of fire that looks as if it could be on loan from the Evel Knievel museum.

The game against Oklahoma at one-year-old, \$266 million McLane Stadium was a showcase of Big 12 football in the modern era: a hyperspeed, sensory-overloaded version that is as glitzy as anything Las Vegas has to offer. Last weekend kicked off the conference's enthralling denouement, a three-week stretch during which the top four teams (Baylor, Oklahoma, Oklahoma State and TCU) were set to face one another in a veritable round-robin tournament that could either serve as an impeccably timed springboard to the College Football Playoff—or as a series of trips down the gangplank. The spectacle between the Bears and the Sooners last Saturday was appropriately over the top: 78 points; 927 yards; a 410-pound tight end making a nimble touchdown catch (senior LaQuan McGowan of Baylor); and an undersized quarterback pinballing across the field in a four-TD, Heisman-worthy performance (Oklahoma junior Baker Mayfield).

America's heartland has become the land of show-time football. Video-game scores from around the conference flickered on a ribbon screen that wraps

around McLane: 59–44 (Texas Tech over Kansas State), 38–20 (West Virginia over Texas) and 35–31 (Oklahoma State over Iowa State). In becoming the only school in the country to *twice* rally from 17 down this season, Oklahoma State kept its perfect season intact as it heads into home showdowns against Baylor (8–1) and Oklahoma (9–1). “I’m sure TV loves us,” said Mike Gundy, the 48-year-old Cowboys coach with the spiky boy-band hair. Yes, but will the selection committee?

YOU GO into the No. 6 team’s backyard on a night like tonight and play this way. . . ,” said coach Bob Stoops after Oklahoma’s 44–34 victory. “We’re one of those teams that has a chance . . . *at everything.*”

His signature white visor ringing hair still wet from the night’s warm rain, Stoops was using his postgame press conference to politick. After suffering a seemingly fatal 24–17 loss to Texas on Oct. 10, the Sooners had won their last four by scores of 55–0, 63–27, 62–7 and 52–16—and now could crack the CFP code with victories at home against TCU (9–1) and at OSU (10–0). In recent years, as the Big 12 has dwelled in the shadow of the SEC, Stoops has become more and more ornery when defending his program and his conference. Take SEC Network pundit Paul Finebaum, who at the start of the season proclaimed Oklahoma “irrelevant” after its 8–5 finish last season. Stoops, following his team’s 31–24 win over then No. 23 Tennessee on Sept. 12, shot back, “Ask Tennessee and their 105,000 people if we’re relevant or not.” Last week Stoops went on a national radio show and made an impassioned case not only for his team but also for Baylor and TCU, citing overlooked nonconference wins for each. (“People have selective memories,” he barked.) When Stoops’s comments were replayed over speakers during the tailgating outside McLane, the Bears faithful roared in appreciation.

The Big 12—the coaches, players, fans, media members—have embraced an us-against-the-world attitude. With four playoff spots and five power conferences, at least one league is going to be left out every year. Last year the Big 12 looked like a CFP shoo-in at midseason, with both Baylor and TCU undefeated. But the Bears, after beating TCU 61–58, lost to West Virginia 41–27. In the final playoff rankings, the committee put one-loss Ohio State, fresh off a 59–0 throttling of No. 11 Wisconsin in the Big Ten title game, at No. 4, even though TCU had been ranked third in the committee’s poll the week before. The Buckeyes, of course, won the national championship, but the committee’s decision reinforced the notion that the Big 12’s unbridled and joyful brand of football remains underappreciated.

The committee—a group of 12 former coaches, administrators and executives, only one under the age of 50—hasn’t exactly warmed to the Big 12 in 2015. In the Nov. 10 playoff rankings Baylor, then undefeated, came in at No. 6 behind two one-loss teams (No. 2 Alabama and No. 4 Notre Dame), while Oklahoma State—fresh off a 49–29 throttling of TCU, the No. 8 team *in the committee’s own poll*—barely cracked the top 10. The trend suggests that when the final rankings are announced on Dec. 6, a one-loss Big 12 champ could be on the outside looking in, again. In Waco there were even grumblings of a doomsday scenario in which an undefeated Big 12 team is shut out. Would one-loss Notre Dame be given an invite over a 12–0



Power 5 team like Oklahoma State? No one knows.

Big 12 supporters believe CFP chairman Jeff Long takes potshots at the conference every time he opens his mouth. When talking about 10–0 Iowa, which leapfrogged Baylor to No. 5 last week, Long said, “They’ve shown consistent improvement. Shown consistency on both sides of the ball. While they’ve not been flashy, they have been solid on both sides of the ball.” Translation: The Big 12 might have four of the top six offenses in the nation, but their teams can’t play defense. It’s a sentiment shared by others: ESPN’s Kirk Herbstreit recently compared the Big 12 to Arena football.

But when given the chance, the Big 12’s elite have shown they can go toe-to-toe with anyone. Last year TCU shredded Mississippi—and the SEC’s best defense—in the Peach Bowl 42–3. Baylor torched Michigan State’s D, ranked second in the Big Ten, for 41 points during a one-point Cotton Bowl loss. This season two of the most high-profile computer rankings had Oklahoma and Baylor ranked first and second in the country when they took the field in Waco. The Sooners were also third in the country in yards per play.

“It’s mind-boggling, the lack of respect the Big 12



throws around quarterbacks as if they were Metropolis henchmen.

A Nov. 28 date with Oklahoma at Boone Pickens Stadium looms as the conference's de facto championship and potentially a play-in game to the national semifinals. The Sooners jumped from No. 12 to No. 7 in the AP poll after the win in Waco, when they looked like the best all-around team in the conference. While their D held Baylor to 416 yards, 250 under its season average, their offense continued to roll behind a former Texas Tech walk-on who won Big 12 Offensive Freshman of the Year in 2013, left Lubbock and walked on again in Norman. Now 6' 1", 209-pound Baker Mayfield may be the best quarterback in the land. His statistics through the first nine games—3,082 yards on 70.2% completions, 31 touchdown, five interceptions—stack up favorably against those of the past 13 quarterbacks

“I don’t know what it’s going to take for people to respect us,” says Darlington of the conference. “I don’t know what it’s going to take to get a little love.”

gets,” Oklahoma senior center Ty Darlington said after Saturday’s win. “The team we beat out there is a great team. Even the Kansas States and the Iowa States, people don’t know how good these teams are. It doesn’t really make sense because I think we play good, exciting football here. I don’t know what it’s going to take for people to respect us. I don’t know what it’s going to take to get a little love.”

WHAT IT might take is better scheduling and one more game.

Across the board Big 12 teams have played soft nonconference opponents; Oklahoma’s victory over Tennessee is by far the league’s most notable this season. The conference also doesn’t have a championship game, which gives teams in other conferences a chance to notch one more win against a quality opponent. (The Big 12, with 10 teams, falls short of the 12 needed to have such a finale.) Baylor and TCU were 11–1 last year; Ohio State was 12–1.

That’s why it’s often assumed that a Big 12 team will need to run the table to make the top four, leaving Oklahoma State as the league’s last chance. The Cowboys’ road is as straightforward as the 82 miles down I-35 from Norman to Stillwater: Finish 12–0 and they win their second Big 12 championship. With quarterback Mason Rudolph and wide receiver James Washington—a sophomore duo as dynamic as any in any conference—Oklahoma State puts up 43.6 points a game, seventh in the nation. The Cowboys also have the Big 12’s standout defensive player, Emmanuel Ogbah, the bespectacled 6’ 4”, 275-pound junior end known as Clark Kent, who

to win the Heisman (two of them from Oklahoma, Jason White in 2003 and Sam Bradford in ’08). The hype machine went into overdrive after Mayfield passed for 270 yards with three touchdowns and one interception and rushed for 76 yards and another score last Saturday. “We’re clicking at the right time,” says Mayfield, “but people still haven’t seen the best from us.”

Mayfield was talking about Oklahoma, though he could have been speaking for the Big 12 contenders who will be front and center for the

conference’s thrilling final act. Should Baylor (with remaining road games against Oklahoma State and TCU over the next two weeks, and a date with Texas at home) or TCU (which goes to Oklahoma this weekend before hosting Baylor) win out, each could still take the conference crown, though earning a playoff berth—given the number of one-loss teams with stronger nonconference schedules—would require a lot of other teams to stumble.

It was almost 11 p.m. in Waco, and a drizzle continued to fall on the Oklahoma fans who remained in the stands, dancing in the aisles, chanting “Boomer Sooner.” The first round in the Great 2015 Big 12 Knockout Tournament was over; now it was up to the playoff committee to decide whether there was more to the spectacle than smoke and mirrors. □

ROUND ROBIN

Rudolph [opposite] leads the Cowboys’ high-scoring attack; the Bears turn to McGowan [80] for some clout; Oklahoma gets a lift from Sterling Shepard [3] and Samaje Perrine [32].





THEY STAYED TO CHEER. After the race was over, after all the wrecked cars were packed away in their haulers, after tempers cooled, after the sun went down at the track, they stayed to cheer in the dark. They stayed to cheer Jeff Gordon.

That's understating things. They stayed to go mental for Jeff Gordon, the man whose 2004 and '07 wins at Talladega had irked fans so much that they showered his car with beer cans. Now here he was at Martinsville Speedway, being showered with love.

Even he found it amazing. "I don't know what it feels like to be a rock star, but that's as close as it can get, I think," Gordon said after piloting his number 24 Chevrolet to victory in the crash-filled Goody's Headache Relief Shot 500 on Nov. 1.

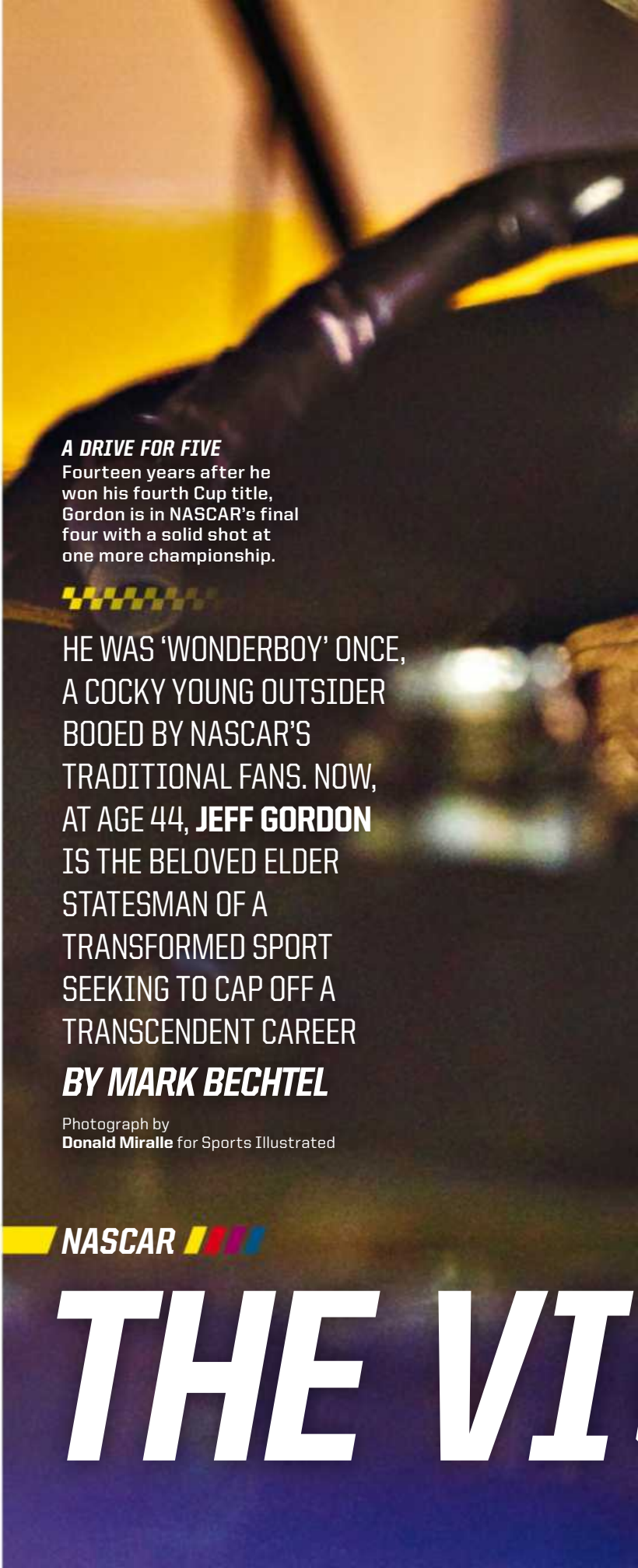
The 93rd win of Gordon's Sprint Cup career clinched his spot in Sunday's four-man shootout for the season title. Should Gordon finish ahead of Kyle Busch, Kevin Harvick and Martin Truex Jr. at Homestead-Miami Speedway, stock car's iron man—already on a short list of the sport's best drivers ever and an even shorter list of its most important—will go out on top. Gordon, who will retire after the race, at age 44, will be NASCAR's champion for the fifth time, 14 years after his last title.

Should that happen, it will trigger a three-Goody's din at Homestead. "I think a lot of people that maybe aren't my fans are kind of looking at my career: the respect, just winding it down, what it means," Gordon said after Martinsville.

For years the subset of NASCAR fans classifying themselves as "people that maybe aren't Jeff Gordon fans" was huge. Gordon had his supporters, but few drivers elicited vitriol the way he did. Many was the race fan who, when asked for whom he or she rooted, offered some variation of, "The 3, and whoever wrecks the 24."

The 3 was, of course, the chariot of Dale Earnhardt, a black Chevrolet that oozed badassery. Gordon broke into stock car racing in the early 1990s, a time when rugged and often mustachioed men ruled the track. Seven-time Cup champion Richard Petty had an upper lip so well covered that Groucho Marx would have been envious. Dale Earnhardt's 'stache was so thick it could strain clam chowder.

Gordon, on the other hand, was a gangly kid with a mustache that was losing to his eyebrows in the battle for most dominant tonsorial feature on his face. He also wore something resembling a mullet, only it parted in the front as well as the back. He was trying to look the tough guy without much success, and making matters worse was his simultaneous eagerness to appear sophisticated. When Gordon met Ray Evernham, the crew chief with whom he would win three of his four NASCAR championships, they were carrying identical carbon-fiber briefcases. "Mine was chock-full of paperwork," says Evernham. "He



A DRIVE FOR FIVE

Fourteen years after he won his fourth Cup title, Gordon is in NASCAR's final four with a solid shot at one more championship.



HE WAS 'WONDERBOY' ONCE, A COCKY YOUNG OUTSIDER BOOED BY NASCAR'S TRADITIONAL FANS. NOW, AT AGE 44, **JEFF GORDON** IS THE BELOVED ELDER STATESMAN OF A TRANSFORMED SPORT SEEKING TO CAP OFF A TRANSCENDENT CAREER

BY MARK BECHTEL

Photograph by Donald Miralle for Sports Illustrated



THE VI



CTORY LAP

had a pad so he could take notes. But he also had an open-wheel [racing] magazine, some peanuts and a Gameboy in there.”

That magazine was just another indication that Gordon didn't fit the mold. Growing up in California, he started racing quarter midgets at age five. When he was 14, his stepfather, John Bickford, moved the family to Indiana so Jeff could more easily move up the open-wheel ladder. “John is a very forward-thinking man,” says Andy Graves, who is now Toyota Racing's technical director. Graves found out just how forward thinking when he was 19. He helped the 18-year-old Gordon with a setup in a sprint car race in Sandusky, Ohio, and Gordon lapped the field. In Victory Lane, Bickford asked Graves to move to Indiana to live and work with the family.

So when Gordon made the switch to stock cars, he was viewed—wrongly—as having been the product of a deep-pocketed organization. Earnhardt didn't help things when, in 1995, he began calling Gordon, who was on his way to his first title, Wonderboy. It was a case of Earnhardt, an inveterate buster of chops, doing what he did best: stirring things up. But his substantial fan base took it as something more serious, a declaration of hostilities.

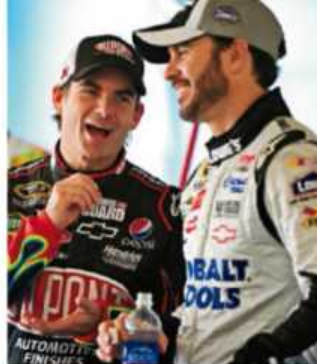
After the '93 season ended, Gordon revealed that he had been dating Brooke Sealey. Because of her job as Miss Winston—one of the models in the employ of NASCAR's top sponsor, whose duties included handing out trophies in Victory Lane—they had to keep the relationship on the down low. When they made it public after the season, Earnhardt quipped, “Some of us were beginning to wonder if you liked girls.” That gave ammo to the Fans Against Gordon army, a not-so-enlightened gang that delighted in bearing signs and stickers with Gordon's picture and the group's acronym.

The irony is that Earnhardt actually liked and mentored Gordon. Earnhardt's gibes, befitting a man who named his boat *Sunday Money*, were delivered with one eye on the bottom line. Rivalries sold. “He respected young talent and saw it benefitting the sport, which would benefit him,” says Gordon. “And not just the sport but his business. And the business of licensed merchandising, which ended up benefitting both of us.”

Gordon was in a no-win situation. Push back, and he's picking a fight he can only lose. Sit there and take it, and he's stuck being Wonderboy. So he became Wonderboy. “Jeff Gordon is a pretty smart guy,” says Evernham. “The best thing he could do at that time was be respectful and understand that he's the new guy. You couldn't get away with the same things with Jeff Gordon today.”

THE LAST guy to try get away with something with Jeff Gordon was Brad Keselowski. At Texas last November, Keselowski, the 2012 Sprint Cup champion, sideswiped Gordon on a restart. Gordon went after him on pit road, triggering a brawl between their teams. Afterward, Gordon appeared on live TV with his lip scraped and said of Keselowski, “He's just a dips---. You know, I mean, the way he races, I don't know how he's ever won a championship.”

It was quite an outburst for a guy who was long disparaged for being too vanilla in front of a camera. “Early on in my career I focused on trying to say the right things, making sure my sponsors and fans were pleased and my team owner was not upset with me,” Gordon says. “I never



STEERING & STARS

At the track, Gordon bonded with Johnson (top) and Earnhardt; on TV (opposite), he kept pace with Ripa (top) and *SNL*'s Parnell.



“EARLY ON IN MY CAREER I NEVER WANTED TO ROCK THE APPLE CART. AS YOU GAIN MATURITY, YOU LET GO AND LET YOUR PERSONALITY COME OUT.”

wanted to rock the apple cart. As you gain more knowledge and experience and comfort and maturity, you let go of some of that and let your personality come out.”

The emergence of that personality took some time. Gordon was given a series of opportunities that were nontraditional for a stock car driver. Petty had been a guest on *Hee Haw*. Gordon hosted *Saturday Night Live* in 2003, shortly after NBC acquired NASCAR broadcast rights. When discussing his crossover gigs, Gordon can sound oddly dispassionate, like a man with an eye on the bottom line. Asked about *SNL*, he says, “When an opportunity comes your way, you have to look at [it] and make a decision on how to pursue it and try to make something out of it.”

In fact, he turned down *Saturday Night Live* once before agreeing to host. “When I think about [doing things like *SNL*] beforehand,” he says, “I get very nervous and sweat a lot and stress about it. But when it's happening, I embrace it and try to make it fun.”

He ended up killing in a sketch with Chris Parnell in which Gordon played a redneck named Ricky Funk, whose mullet and mustache bore a striking resemblance to Gordon's a decade earlier. “He brought as much to that as most actors would,” says Parnell.

JEFF SIMER/CHARLOTTE OBSERVER/MCT/GETTY IMAGES (TOP); PETER COSROVE/AP



Gordon became a regular fill-in for Regis Philbin on *Live with Regis and Kelly*. Again, he was a natural. He could talk about anything from racing to politics to the Cannes film festival. “He’s a guy’s guy, but he’s also a guy who’s in tune with women,” says Kelly Ripa. “He’s a genuine guy. He’s not a phony-baloney.”

AS GORDON was emerging from his shell in his public life, he was also undergoing a change in his personal life. He had married Sealey in 1994. They split in 2003. Not long before that, Gordon had become a car owner, teaming with his car owner, Rick Hendrick, to field a ride for 26-year-old Californian Jimmie Johnson. “I saw an opportunity not only to help someone get their opportunity,” Gordon says, “but to be a part of it—and be part of it from the business side.”

Gordon had long believed that friendships and racing don’t mix. But that changed with Johnson, who like Gordon was young, good-looking and single. “I didn’t anticipate us becoming friends, and had I not gone through the divorce, I don’t know if we would have been as close friends as we were,” Gordon says. “But the timing of everything—we hit it off.”

Their fast friendship caught Johnson by surprise too. “The guy I met in a few meetings, the stories in the shop about how to approach him, how to handle him, the dos and do nots—they were so different from when I went to my first test session [at Las Vegas Motor Speedway] with him,”

Johnson says. “We went to Vegas three days early, and on the flight out I quickly realized we weren’t going to go sightseeing.”

“Jimmie came in right during the transformation,” Gordon says with a laugh. “[When] I was 25 years old and was having tremendous success in one of the most popular sports in America, making tremendous money, I was living like I was 55 years old. I was a homebody. I was holding Bible studies and having family dinners. I missed out on a lot of my childhood because of racing, and I felt like I was also missing some of the best times of my life in my late 20s and early 30s. So when things didn’t work out with that marriage, I was gonna make up for lost time.”

Another marked change was that Gordon stopped bringing religion into interviews. “I wasn’t brought up [with religion],” he says. “It was something I got introduced to when I came into the Cup Series. I explored it and learned a lot from that experience. I feel like it’s helped make me a better person, but I choose to do it more privately now.”

The good times coincided with good racing. Johnson won his first race in his 13th start, at California Speedway in 2002. He and Gordon were supposed to fly home, but in Victory Lane, Gordon notified him of a change in plans: Road trip! Anyone who was up for it would report to Gordon’s rented motor home for a night out in L.A.

The two men had plenty in common besides driving. Each had a pied-à-terre in New York City. Their girlfriends, New York-based models Ingrid Vandebosch (Gordon’s) and Chandra Janway (Johnson’s), were pals. The drivers even shared an affinity for break dancing. “At parties or events, if I had a couple drinks, I became the party favor,” says Gordon. “In a private setting I loosen up enough to somehow break out one of my break dancing moves, and once one of your friends sees that, you’re the break dancer.”

So it was that Gordon was showing off his moves the night before Johnson’s 2004 wedding to Janway. “He was doing the nickel,” says Johnson, “and the edge of a table got him across his nose.”

“Chandra was not happy,” says Gordon. “We did our best to cover it up [for the pictures].”



DAVID HAHN/CON SPORTSWIRE (CAR); BUENA VISTA TELEVISION (WITH RIPA); DANIA EDELSON/NBC/NBCU PHOTO BANK/GETTY IMAGES (SNU)

His friendship with Johnson loosened Gordon up, but eventually it hardened him as well. Those old fears about mixing business and pleasure weren't unfounded after all. "Up until 2007, I was pretty O.K. with [competing against Johnson], and then in '07 we had them on the ropes and he came back and smoked us," says Gordon, who had the points lead with three races to go. "We started to be more competitors than teammates."

Dustups on the track soon followed. Bumping at Texas in 2010 led Gordon to tell his team over the radio, "Four-time is a little upset," in a singsong voice. (Johnson would win his fifth title—in a row—that year and add a sixth in '13.) They tangled again the next week, at Talladega, leading Gordon to announce, "It takes a lot to make me mad, and I am pissed now."

A truce was brokered by Hendrick, and things have improved. "We're in a really good place right now," says Gordon. "Married, two children, married, two children—you start looking at life a little bit different. [Gordon married Vandebosch in 2006.] You start going, You know what, no matter what, I'll always love this guy. He's a great person, he's a great race car driver. We each have our place, and we're each comfortable with where we fit in, in the racing world and in the world in general."

NO MATTER what Gordon does on Sunday, he won't be able to catch Johnson in career titles. But he will have the third-most victories and the longest streak of consecutive starts in NASCAR history. Gordon has an undeniable gift for hot-shoeing a car. Hendrick noticed it the first time he saw Gordon on a track, in 1992, at Atlanta in what was then the Busch Grand National series. Every time the Baby Ruth car came out of the corner, Hendrick noticed, it had haze coming off the tires: the telltale sign of a loose car. "If you get away with it one time, you're O.K.," Hendrick says. "If you get away with it two or three times in a row, then you're damn good."

"When guys don't have that level of talent, they're going around the corner spending 50% or 60% of their focus just trying not to crash," says Evernham. "[Gordon] can spend 100% of his focus on how to make the car better." And when it comes to giving feedback to a crew chief, Gordon might be the best ever.

"You can see his intelligence in the car," says Johnson. "He feels what's going on, and he's been able to verbalize that to Ray and to [his subsequent crew chiefs]. That's where the magic really lies."

Gordon's first Cup race was in Atlanta, on the final day of the 1992 season. The race is memorable for having been Petty's last and for having had six drivers who were mathematically eligible for the title at the start. Sunday's event in Homestead will feature four contenders, thanks to the new rules of the Chase, a contrivance introduced in 2004 to guarantee a tight points race.



SIGNS OF CHANGE

Once the target of vitriol (and beer cans) from scornful fans, Gordon has been embraced as he turns his final laps.



"I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO BE A ROCK STAR, BUT THAT'S AS CLOSE AS IT CAN GET," GORDON SAID AFTER HIS WIN IN MARTINSVILLE.

Under the old system, which gave equal weight to all races, Gordon would have won titles in 2004, '07 and '14, meaning he would have seven. (To be fair, under the old points he'd be out of contention this year.) There would have been justice in Gordon's going out with seven, the same number won by Petty and Earnhardt—the two drivers who did more than anyone else, save Gordon, to grow their sport. Gordon also changed perceptions within NASCAR, which is now rife with Californians and former open-wheelers.

Now he will join Fox's broadcast team, where he is certain to be insightful and witty. That means he's starting his fifth decade of spending an inordinate amount of his time at race tracks. "I've apologized a number of times for stealing his childhood from him," Bickford says earnestly. "There's no need to race as much as we raced." But Gordon wouldn't change it for anything. Racing is why he's adored by millions, including many who once booed him. It's why in his final season he has been showered with gifts, such as the custom blackjack table from Las Vegas Motor Speedway and

the ponies that Texas Speedway president Eddie Gossage gave him for his kids, eight-year-old Ella and five-year-old Leo. Racing is why he could open the Jeff Gordon Children's Hospital, or give his car to a fan who lost her 2003 Jeff Gordon Monte Carlo in a fire. It's why he can introduce Ella to Taylor Swift. It's why the only thing vanilla about him now is the nose on the Napa Valley Merlot produced by Jeff Gordon Cellars. It's why, when he drives from his home in Charlotte to Martinsville, he takes the Jeff Gordon Expressway, a stretch of I-85 just before the Dale Earnhardt Boulevard exit.

Ask him about his legacy, though, and he demurs. "I don't feel like it's for me to decide," he says. But then he continues: "I put everything I can into my driving and into the team and into life, and I'm proud of that. That's my personal legacy, knowing how much I've put into it and how it's paid off." □

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REVEN

OF THE

NER



AFTER DECADES OF IGNOMINIOUS DEFEATS, **CALTECH** FINALLY HAS A FORMULA

BY CHRIS BALLARD

Photograph by
John W. McDonough for Sports Illustrated



ISTOCKPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES (CHALKBOARD)

FOR TURNING THE TABLES ON ITS CONFERENCE FOES

PICTURE A solitary figure, shooting baskets and muttering. The man is pale and skinny, with round glasses and wispy brown hair. Looks fortyish, as if he should be teaching calculus. But instead he's here in an otherwise deserted gym, in Pasadena, on a warm fall morning, and he's—well, it's not clear exactly what he's doing. But whatever it is, he's taking it very seriously. He shoots, mutters, shoots again.

Get closer and you can hear him. "Fourteen for 22," he says. The man is a coach, and he is conducting an experiment. He has rewatched every shot his team took last season—because this is the type of thing he does—and noticed something peculiar about home games. On one basket in this gym, his players made shots. On the other, not so much. Was that a fluke? Are the windows at the north end distracting? He wants to know, because he needs every edge he can get.

So now he shoots, and asks his assistants to do the same three times a week. All because the coach believes he's onto something, a philosophy of academia and athletics that will enable him to turn around the most un-turn-around-able program in the history of college basketball.

If, that is, he can just get his players to stop studying so much.

PERHAPS YOU are familiar with the California Institute of Technology, a school of 1,000 in Pasadena, and, if so, perhaps you are also familiar with its contrasting reputations.

Academically, Caltech has few peers. It's regularly ranked as the top research university in the world, and faculty and alumni have won 35 Nobel Prizes. Albert Einstein once mulled his theory of relativity on campus, not far from where Richard Feynman hit upon the concept of nanotechnology. Students who survive the grueling course load make an average salary of \$82,000 upon graduation. Most have paid off the bulk of their debt by then, working summers at places like Google, Microsoft or Uber, bringing in up to \$30,000 in three months. When the entertainment industry needs to depict really smart

people, they're often from Caltech, from *Real Genius* to *Numb3rs* to the *Big Bang Theory* to *Modern Family*.

Athletically, Caltech has few peers, too, though for entirely different reasons. The baseball team has lost all of its conference games this millennium. The football program was euthanized in 1993. But the hoops team's struggles are the most infamous. The Beavers once went a quarter century without winning a game in the Southern California Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (SCIAC). Occasionally, players did homework on the bench, because at least that way they were being productive.

It's been easy to treat the team as a joke. Context is important, though. Unlike the Ivies or other Division III schools, Caltech makes no allowances for admitting athletes. Only a handful of students have the grades (3.8 GPA) and median SAT scores (2230 to 2340) to get in, and only a handful of those have any interest in basketball.

Then there's the matter of time, or the lack of it. Students regularly study eight to 10 hours a day, slogging until the gray light of morning. Starting guard Andrew Hogue arrived at practice having gone sleepless for more than 30 hours on at least five occasions. Once,

after he slumped into the campus's lone minimart to purchase yet another bottle of 5-Hour Energy, the cashier threatened to cut him off. "Dude," Hogue recalls the man saying, "you really can't keep doing this to your body."

Hogue's classmates couldn't figure him out. Here he was, a computer science major who had spent his summer working at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, a kid whose future was assured. Why not just skip practice? Why play basketball at all?

It's a valid question: Why would anyone sacrifice, and work so hard, when all he is going to do is lose?

“HOW DO YOU GET



LIVER ESLINGER sat on the saggy couch in his apartment in Somerville, Mass., in the summer of 2008, staring at his laptop. *Two hundred sixty-nine*. He pondered the odds of a college team losing that many conference games in a row.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" his wife, Austin, asked.

After six years as an assistant at MIT, Eslinger, then 32, had been hired as the coach at Caltech. The job paid only 10 months a year. He'd have to teach a P.E. class too. And move cross-country.

Still, Eslinger was an optimist by nature, fond of saying, "Well, if you look at it as an *advantage*," when confronted with a problem. The dirt around his childhood backyard hoop in Broken Arrow, Okla.? An *advantage*; it forced him to keep his dribble low. The lack of competition in the burbs when the family moved outside Albany, N.Y.? An *advantage*; it forced him to venture to Washington Park, where his real basketball education occurred.

At D-III Clark in Worcester, Mass., Eslinger had been shorter (6' 1"), skinnier (a buck-sixty) and less springy (as

AN IMPORT OF IMPORT

When the 6' 10" Al-Rayes decided to come to Pasadena, it marked a turning point for the program.



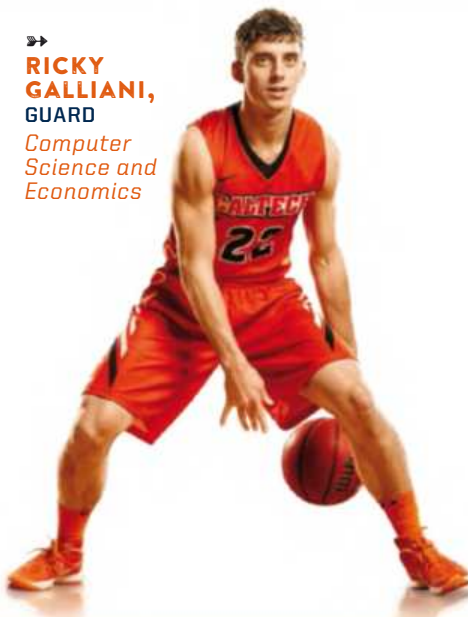
◀
NASSER AL-RAYES,
CENTER
Mechanical Engineering



in, not-at-all springy) than his teammates. His solution: Work harder and be smarter. He took three giant strides off the line during suicides to create “competitive separation.” After one set of sprints, a teammate stood nearby, panting. “You actually like this s--- don’t you?” he said. To Eslinger, it was the greatest of compliments. Around the same time, he fell in love with sports psychology, and later titled his dissertation at Boston University, “Mental Imagery Ability in High and Low Performance Collegiate Basketball Players.”

Now, Eslinger had big dreams: To win the SCIAC. To make the NCAA tournament.

»
RICKY GALLIANI,
GUARD
Computer Science and Economics



Murphy was a terrific kid, tough as they come, with 2190 SAT scores, but, as he wrote to Eslinger, “He is not a very skilled basketball player.” A shooting guard, Murphy couldn’t shoot (two three-point attempts all season), score (6.0 points per game) or handle the ball (Bowker forbade him from bringing it up court).

Still, Eslinger persisted, asking for film. So Bowker scraped together “highlights” of a wild-haired blond kid setting screens, sprinting on the break and throwing his butt into people on box outs. For reasons Bowker couldn’t fathom, Eslinger remained enthused.

In Murphy, Eslinger saw a tough kid who could help him change the culture of Caltech basketball. Murphy spent the

THEM TO PLAY

CONFIDENTLY IF THEY’VE NEVER PLAYED?” ESLINGER WROTE.

And then he met his team.

They were smart and nice and one—center Ryan Elmquist, a computer science major who is now a software engineer at Google—was even tall (6’ 5”) and bouncy. But the roster contained more valedictorians than high school basketball players. During the second practice Eslinger told them to do the weave, a sixth-grade-level drill. He never tried it again.

Even so, Eslinger’s preseason entries in his journal, a black moleskin notebook, were infused with hope. He wrote of “shocking the world.” Then the Beavers—so named because they are “nature’s engineers”—engineered a 90–25 loss to SCIAC rival LaVerne in one of Eslinger’s first games, turning the ball over 32 times. “How do you get students to play basketball confidently if they’ve never played?” the coach wrote. “Is it impossible?”

At least it once was. The Beavers won their lone SCIAC basketball title in 1954, and there were occasional bright spots in the years that followed. In 1980 they beat Pomona, then under a first-year coach named Gregg Popovich. In ’85 they defeated LaVerne. And then . . . nothing. The team went 0 for the 1990s. By 2008, losing had become a badge of honor at Caltech; being really bad at sports just

showed how smart the students were. “There were some dark years,” says Robert Grubbs, a Nobel-winning chemistry professor. “The first time I took my older son to a basketball game here, by half-time he was cheering for the other team.” Athletics were such an afterthought that in 2006 the administration considered eliminating NCAA sports.

To change the culture, Eslinger needed allies. He contacted alumni. Spent long lunches at the campus cafeteria. Launched a p.r. makeover consisting of e-newsletters, a redesigned website and tri-fold recruiting brochures.

None of it muted the pain of losing. Near the end of the 2008–09 season, Caltech was 1–22, 0–12 in conference. The players ran hard but played soft.

“What else can I do?” Eslinger asked Amherst coach David Hixon, after losing to the Lord Jeffs by 50.

Hixon was stumped. Finally he said, “Get some players.”

IN THE spring of 2009, Jeff Bowker, the coach at Colony High, outside of Wasilla, Alaska, received an email from a college coach in California who was interested in one of his players, Collin Murphy. Bowker was shocked. The 6-foot

summer after his high school graduation living with his dad in an 8-by-12-foot shack on Main Bay, in the Prince William Sound, hauling salmon from 5 a.m. to midnight, until they caught enough to support the family for a year. On busy days, when the six-pound sockeyes were slamming into the 100-fathom nets, they rarely stopped to eat. Who cared if the kid wasn’t good at basketball?

By the fourth game he was bringing the ball up, for lack of a better option. He guarded 6’ 5” forwards and quick point guards, outworking and outthinking them all. Murphy also stepped on shoes, locked down off-arms, grabbed jerseys. “He was,” says Eslinger with awe, “exceptionally dirty.”

Sarcastic and goofy, Murphy wore shirts that read, I’M NO ROCKET SURGEON and yelled, “Shooter in the corner!” whenever he spotted up in scrimmages. He spent his free time in the basketball office, watching film. From the start, Eslinger knew he wanted Murphy as his assistant one day.

And yet, loss followed dispiriting loss. Against Claremont, the Beavers fell prey to, as Murphy calls it, “an 87–21 run.” They finished 0–25. The streak stood at 297 games. “It

was,” says Murphy, “straight awful.”

At least the 2010–11 season began auspiciously. Some nonconference wins. A few close SCIAC losses. Still, by the eve of the season finale, at home against Occidental, Caltech’s streak had reached 310 games. That week Murphy sat with Elmquist, now a senior, in his dorm room, downing vodka shots. “I can’t believe,” Elmquist finally said, “that I’m going to go four years and not win one f----- game.”

SOMETIMES INSPIRATION

comes from unlikely places. The weekend before the Occidental game, Eslinger played pickup ball with Doug Eberhardt, a coach from Vancouver in town for the NBA All-Star Game who had recently embedded for a week with the Knicks. Eslinger, an NBA junkie, peppered him with questions until, finally, Eberhardt said, “Why don’t I just give you [coach Mike] D’Antoni’s playbook. I’ve got it out in my car.”

For Eslinger, it was basketball nerd heaven, and studying the diagrams, he had an idea about how to combat Oxy’s switching defense. What if he ran only pick-and-rolls between the 6' 5" Elmquist and freshman point guard Todd Cramer, whose arrival had moved Murphy to the two?

And so, the following Saturday, in front of a relative throng of 400 on senior night in Braun Athletic Center, the Beavers came out in an unorthodox D-III scheme: two shooters in the corners, one on the wing, and Elmquist and Cramer in the roles of Amar’e Stoudemire and Steve Nash.

With eight seconds left Caltech had the ball in a tie game. Eslinger ordered up another pick-and-roll. Elmquist slipped the screen. Cramer lobbed it high. The whistle blew. Foul. Two free throws.

For the first time in a life of constant inquiry—of subjecting everything to a decision matrix—Elmquist’s mind went blank. He heard nothing, remembers nothing.

Swish.

After missing the second, Oxy’s desperation heave fell short. And then: nerd bedlam. Students stormed the floor. Nobel winners pumped their fists. Twenty-six years of losing to

conference rivals extinguished in one surreal night, 46–45.

In the heady days to come, in between appearing on ESPN and talking to *The New York Times*, Eslinger remembers a sneaking feeling. Everyone was celebrating one win. But Caltech made only 12 field goals and shot 24.5%. Occidental’s best player was injured, and Elmquist was graduating.

After all, the goal wasn’t to win one game. It was to turn the program around.

LOOKING BACK now, it sounds comical: NCAA violations at Caltech? But integrity matters, even for losers. When Betsy Mitchell, a former Olympic medalist in the backstroke, was hired as athletic di-

rector and a three-year probation. Wrote Bill Plaschke of the *Los Angeles Times*, “[Caltech] has chosen to vacate wins it doesn’t have, shut down the recruiting it doesn’t do and be ineligible for championships it never wins.”

But that wasn’t true. The basketball team had won; to everyone’s relief, that Occidental victory stood.

When Dave Briski was hired as an assistant that spring, he made a common mistake. Briski, 22, who had spent four years as a student manager at New Hampshire, drank life out of 24-ounce

EAGER BEAVERS

After last season’s breakthrough, Eslinger’s players are now hungrier to hear his game strategies.



rector in August 2011, she realized that, because the school allows students to “sample” classes for three weeks before officially registering, a total of 30 athletes in 12 sports had been briefly ineligible over the past three academic years.

Caltech self-reported the violations to the NCAA, punished itself with a fine, vacated ineligible wins, banned off-campus recruiting for a year and instituted a postseason ban on all 12 sports. To which the NCAA, clearly with nothing better to do while scandals raged at USC and Miami, added public cen-

steins. He was a scruffy, enthusiastic bulldog of a man whose recruiting notes at elite academic camps included technical terminology like, “Plays his f----- ass off”; “STUD, Big, great hooks with both hands”; and “Fast as f---, lefty, tremendous passer.”

Now, Briski tried to connect to the players by talking academics. *I don’t want to talk to you about computer science*, 6' 6" wing Kc Emezie finally told him. *I want to talk to you about basketball*. Thank god, thought Briski.

It made sense. The students spent

the rest of their lives geeking out. For many, basketball became an escape from schoolwork or, as guard Arjun Chandar says, “a coping strategy.” Elmquist liked that during practice he could “turn my brain off.” But of course that wasn’t truly possible. Not with these kids. If players were burnt from all-nighters, Eslinger held them out. He explained the purpose of drills, lest students raise their hands to debate the rationale. After all, they were trained to think outside the box. Or, as school president Tom Rosenbaum puts it, “to try to solve unsolvable problems.”

And yet the losing continued. In 2012–13, the Beavers again finished winless in the SCIAC. Murphy soldiered on. “I’m from Alaska,” he explains. “The darkness never bothered me.” He finished his career with just that one conference victory.

By this point Eslinger’s confidence was nearly shot. He changed the offense from game to game. In his lower moments he couldn’t help but wonder if that Oxy win had been a mirage. If maybe it wasn’t possible to build a real program at Caltech. If sometimes a problem wasn’t an advantage, it was just a problem.

BY THE spring of 2013, Eslinger had changed the culture. Alumni were engaged. He’d initiated Midnight Madness events: *Hit a half-court shot and win a ball signed by five Nobel winners!* The team understood defense, passing and teamwork. The only thing lacking was the same thing as ever: talent.

And that’s when, in Qatar of all places, Eslinger found a brilliant kid named Nasser Al-Rayes who just happened to also be a 6’ 10” athletic freak. Pursued by MIT, Wesleyan and Williams, Al-Rayes made a flow chart to weigh winning programs against the Caltech coach’s assurance that his program was *about* to win.

Al-Rayes’s freshman season was rocky—which is to say, winless as usual. But by last fall, he, and the team, had matured. Hogue, now a senior point guard, rebounded like a forward. Emezie only had one move—drive right and finish right—but it was a hell of a

move. And, to Eslinger’s delight, Murphy had returned as an assistant coach while also working at a startup.

The 2014–15 season began well enough. Then conference play opened. And, as January turned to February, the new losing streak reached 55 games. Hogue was about to “go donut” for his career.

It was time to take a risk. Eslinger had long-since embraced analytics with a gusto rare for D-III. He videotaped practices. He logged the outcomes of drills, hoping to determine why some players always win. He uploaded game film to a service called Krossover, a do-it-yourself version of Synergy. Now, while scouting Redlands, he and Briski noticed something.

Against the Bulldogs on Feb. 3,



◀◀
**BRENT
CAHILL,**
SWINGMAN
*Computer
Science*

the Beavers came out in a new alignment, one akin to what Warriors center Andrew Bogut would do months later in the NBA playoffs: Lay off the nonshooter and keep Al-Rayes in the paint. Flustered, Redlands made just 4 of 15 threes while Al-Rayes clogged the middle. With 17 seconds left the Beavers were still up three. But this was Cal Tech. Emezie missed a free throw and the Bulldogs sank a three. Tie game, Beavers’ ball, 9.0 to go.

Hogue dished to Emezie, who, as always, drove right. Only he took off too deep on the baseline. The ball hit the glass at a crazy angle and, against the longest of odds, historically and technically, it spun in.

Joy. Murphy hugging players. Players hugging fans. The final stat line was bizarre: Al-Rayes went scoreless but finished with six blocks. Redlands shot a dismal 25.8% for the game. Hogue dashed off a campus-wide email: “Yo, we’re studying after our win. Come by.” That night, they stained the ceiling of their group house with champagne.

And if that were the end of the story, it would be fine. Another streak broken. But it’s what happened five days later that changed everything. The opponent was Whittier, which had beaten Caltech by 14 a month earlier and was notorious for rubbing it in. Hogue remembers his freshman year, when the Poets were up 57 late in the game but still playing their starters. And pressing. While their fans chanted, “Win by 60!”

By halftime, the Beavers were up nine. And that’s when, to the players’ surprise, a torrent of students entered the gym, many in formal wear. It was the Wine and Candlelight dinner—the Caltech version of Valentine’s Day—and word had gotten out about the lead. In a testament to the culture Eslinger, Murphy and the rest had created, the students left a rare social opportunity and walked 10 minutes to watch a basketball game. Now 200 of them were jumping and chanting, “I believe that we will win!”

The players showed swagger. They slapped the floor on defense. Al-Rayes threw down a thunderous follow dunk

CALTECH



◀
**Kc
EMEZIE**
WING
*Computer
Science*

equaled the number of conference wins from the previous 43 years.

For Eslinger, the future had finally arrived.

GO, GO, GO!"

It's 7:30 on an October morning and the Caltech players are running the weave, the drill that once flummoxed their predecessors. One pass leads crisply to the next



year to focus on academics. Murphy left to work at a startup full-time. But this is the new Caltech. No longer is the program about one or two players. No one talks about winning "a" game anymore.

Today's players reject the stereotypes of the past. Lee says he gets "weird, judgmental looks" when he admits that he "only" studies four to five hours a night. It's a fascinating transformation. For decades, Caltech acted as the counterbalance to the bloating of corporate college sports, an exemplar for those trying to put athletics in perspective. But perhaps it went too far. "In the past, being a jock was almost a negative," says Grubbs, the Nobel winner. "At least now it's not a negative." He laughs. "That's sort of progress."

Cahill chose Caltech over UCLA because, "Why would I want to practice four hours a day if I'm not going to the

ONE DIRECTION

Emezie led the Beavers with 13.8 points last season while going almost exclusively to his right.

LEE SAYS HE GETS "WEIRD LOOKS" WHEN HE SAYS HE ONLY

off a missed free throw. "Guys," Eslinger shouted as he walked the length of the bench, eyes afire. "We're for real!" And they were. This wasn't a squeak-it-out, low-scoring, ugly Caltech win. This wasn't a fluke. This was an old-fashioned, high-scoring 92-77 butt-kicking. Al-Rayes finished with a fantasy basketball line: 22 points, 12 rebounds, six assists and six blocks.

As the clock wound down, the starters sat on the bench, arms around one another, grinning in disbelief. The buzzer sounded and a wave of students in neckties and strapless dresses crashed onto the court, whooping and hugging the players. Eslinger saved his celebrating for later, when he and Briski bar-crawled through Pasadena, drinking away years of frustration one frothy pint at a time.

Then, the icing: 10 days later, in its next home game, Caltech beat LaVerne 70-69. In three weeks the team had

until 6' 4" freshman Brent Cahill catches it and, with shocking nonchalance, hammers down a two-hand dunk. Cahill, who declined a walk-on spot at UCLA, is a basketball unicorn: a crazy smart kid who can shoot and, if he really tries, come close to grazing his head on the rim.

Al-Rayes is next. He yanks the rim so hard, you fear for its mooring. Rather than working for NASA, Al-Rayes spent last summer at IMG in Bradenton, Fla., training with Trail Blazers forward Moe Harkless and others. He still intends to go to grad school and become an engineer—once he's done playing professionally overseas.

The team is stacked by Caltech standards. There's Emezie, second-team All-SCIAC last year; Galliani, who can stroke it; and 6' 6" junior forward Lawrence Lee, who scored 38 in a game last season. Still, because it's Caltech, nothing is easy. Two rotation players chose not to play this

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NBA?" Others would have transferred if not for hoops. Despite the crushing academic load, the GPA of athletes at Caltech is just as high as that of non-athletes. But as Elmquist says, "No one at Google cares what grades I got. They cared that I learned stuff and can do things." And guess what he usually ends up talking about over drinks? "That time I helped Caltech break the streak."

The man who spearheaded this change sits in the cramped office he shares with Briski, squinting at a computer screen. On the wall above his desk, in neat cursive script, is a congratulatory note from Popovich. It came attached to a case of pinot noir.

On this morning the coaches are going over potential recruits. The pickings remain slim. Anyone with a GPA under 3.8 gets discarded. Anyone not

good enough to play gets bumped. How many does that leave?

"In the whole country?" Briski asks. He does some math, consults his Front Rush recruiting software, then says, "About 250." The vast majority will choose the Ivies or a less-stressful D-III school. Others won't get in. One of last year's top recruits had to settle for his safety school: MIT.

For now, Eslinger can't worry about that. He is fixated on the final step in the program's evolution: shooting. "When we hopped into a shot, we hit 40% of our threes last season," he says. "That was 20% better than when we one-two stepped into it."

He heads downstairs to the gym, eager to demonstrate: Hop and you're already squared up; step and you're out of balance. He is pumped. "I'm going to blow their minds when I show them the video and data!"

Now, as Eslinger shoots, a bald man with a bushy gray beard peeks into the gym. He is wearing a Hawaiian shirt, old jeans and sandals. His shirt pocket bristles with pens. He is, naturally, a Nobel Prize winner, the theoretical physicist

VE HOURS A NIGHT.

David Politzer. He ambles over. At this point, the season is still a few weeks away. Eslinger has yet to determine the truth about the basket discrepancy. (In the end he decides it was a fluke, but one worth monitoring.) Likewise, he has yet to institute his dream of a nearly positionless team with Al-Rayes launching threes. And he has yet to break down film from the team's emphatic 86-77 preseason win at Occidental, searching for insight that he hopes will allow Caltech to chase its first SCIAC league crown in 50 years.

No, for now he is just a skinny guy in glasses who looks an awful lot like an older version of the kids he coaches, gleefully shooting jumpers while a Nobel laureate watches, all the while working toward the same goal as every Caltech student: Trying to solve the unsolvable problem. □

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Babies on Board

→ BY STEVE RUSHIN

SPORTSWRITERS, THE sportswriter Jimmy Cannon claimed, work in “the Toy Department of human life,” one of many ways sports journalists have been infantilized over the years. Some of us need a bottle to fall asleep. Every photographer wears a bib. And ponderous columns like this one are known as *thumb suckers*.

But then, everyone involved in professional sports is a bit of a baby. Owners demand lavish playpens paid for by someone else. Athletes drop their underpants on the floor and find them neatly laundered in their locker the next day. The ultimate reward for every champion is a shiny object and—if he or she behaves exceptionally well—a trip to Disney World.

Yet the biggest babies have to be sports fans. Not you, specifically, but just about all the others. When Cardinals running back Chris Johnson scored a touchdown last month and tried to hand the ball to a 12-year-old fan, it was knocked loose by some so-called adults, one of whom refused to give it back. He literally took the ball and went home.

A few nights later, in Pittsburgh, former Penguins coach Dan Bylsma, now with the Sabres, tossed a puck over the glass to an eight-year-old boy in the crowd. But just before the puck dropped into the boy’s trembling hands, a balding, middle-aged “man” intercepted it, stuck it in his back pocket and fixed the kid with a triumphant glance. Like taking candy from a baby, but who was the baby?

Mercifully, the Cardinals and the Penguins made it up to both kids, giving them souvenirs and attention and honoring them for being more mature than the grown men seated around them. But this kind of thing happens all the time.

Attend any game in North America, and you’ll see so-called grown-ups compete with kids for foul balls or clamor for T-shirts shot from cannons in keeping with their long-standing love of leisurewear. Sports—and long-haul commercial airline flights—seem to attract middle-aged men dressed like children, in sneakers, shorts, jerseys and baseball caps, often sucking on the plastic nipple of a grande mochaccino.

Sports don’t have a monopoly on these creatures. In other walks of life, *kidults*—the vomitous coinage this phenomenon has spawned—might enjoy cosplay, Legos and the burgeoning

industry of coloring books marketed to men and women. We communicate through thumbs-up on Facebook, thumbs-down on YouTube, hearts on Twitter and frowny faces via text: the full range of infantile expression.

Even so, is there anything sadder than the unrequited high five that a 40-year-old man offers an NBA rookie who’s jogging to the tunnel after a game? Who but babies and sports fans scream at the godlike figures in their lives whenever things don’t go their way? If you’re an adult, and you’re not employed as an athlete’s tax attorney or bail bondsman, you shouldn’t ask him for his signature on a piece of paper.

Of course, part of the point of watching sports is to become childlike again, sucking soda through a straw and eating ice cream from a hat. Jimmy Fallon tells a story of eating Cracker Jacks at a Yankees World Series game with Lorne Michaels and Jack Nicholson when the latter said to him, after several moments of silent observation, “Didja get your *priiiiize* yet, Jimmy?”

But there’s a difference between arrested development and development that’s been arrested, cuffed, stuffed, perp-walked and sentenced to life. And so this past World Series seemed to be an endless series of cutaway shots to adult fans in anguish: weeping, praying or peering at the game through splayed fingers, as if at a horror movie. It’s a familiar routine to anyone who has ever been 10 years old. But it seems a little puerile even to some veterans of the Toy Department—and we wear our names and photos on laminated cards around our necks, in case we get lost.

All of this is to say that it’s a short distance from infant to fan, from *boo-hoo* to *boo*. Thank heaven, then, that while babies, fans and columnists often go on red-faced rants like this one, they will also—often in mid-cry, after a sudden burst of flatulence—abruptly pass out and leave a peaceful silence. □

Sports don't have a monopoly on so-called kidult culture, but it's the most fertile soil for cultivating grown-up infantilism.



Who's the biggest baby in sports?

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